



CH4  
The  
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Four  
Lit Mag  
Issue 4



# **C4: The Chamber Four Lit Mag**

## **Issue 4: Fall 2013**

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# **DAVID S. ATKINSON**

## **home improvement**

I think it was a Tuesday when my house left me. Gone when I got back from the updated SEC filing requirements seminar in Akron. There I was, fresh home from the hustle and bustle of the city, only my home wasn't there.

At least, I'm pretty sure it was a Tuesday. All the big changes happen on Tuesdays. So, being a Tuesday, I shouldn't have been too surprised when I got out of the taxi and my house wasn't there—certainly not after Akron.

I was, though. I was surprised. For a second, I thought the taxi driver had dropped me at the wrong place—a vacant lot, not my home. I turned back around by reflex, before I'd had a chance to think, to say something. He'd already driven on, though—off to do more carefree driving, the lucky dog. No need to worry about anything. Man, what a life.

When I turned again, as the situation sunk in, I saw that it was my home after all. Or, rather, it should have been. My house was just gone.

And when I say gone, I mean gone. There wasn't a piece left, not a shingle or a board. Even the foundation was missing, the yard too. There was just a hole.

It seemed like there would've been something that used to run in or out of the house: gas lines or power cables, pipes or coax wires. It was a blank slate, though. The hole was as bare as a de-linted navel.

Looking at it all, or rather at the nothing since the “all” was gone, I heard my neighbor Ralph come tromping over.

“Phil,” he grunted, “what happened to your house?”

“It’s gone, Ralph,” I informed him. Ralph and I were always having these stimulating conversations, because we were neighbors. Or we had been, before my house was gone.

“Can’t believe I didn’t see that.”

I nodded.

“So... was there an explosion or something? Gas leak?”

“No, Ralph, my house just left.”

“Left? More like somebody stole it. You should call the cops.”

But I knew better. Involving authorities would only embitter the situation, turn things rancorous. Did I even have a legal right to force her to return? After all, how could anyone have stolen my entire house? The idea was absurd. They would have surely left traces, paint chips or nails. There would have been giant horrible tracks in the mud from heavy diesel machines necessary for such a task, but there was none of that. No, my house left of her own accord.

“I’ll handle it,” I explained. “Police don’t like to get involved in domestic situations.”

“So what’re you gonna do?”

“Get an apartment, I guess.”

At that, Ralph tromped back over to his yard and continued raking. Or, maybe he hadn’t been raking before popping over for our little chat. Maybe he spontaneously started afterward.

I hadn’t really been upset before that moment. I definitely hadn’t been angry. Suddenly, though, I

desperately wanted to kill Ralph. It suddenly seemed possible that my house left me for him.

After all, when he trimmed his hedge, the one that ran along my yard, didn't he stroll over and do my side as well? Didn't he sometimes keep going and snow blow my front walk after his own? In being, or pretending to be, neighborly, he'd paid an awful lot of attention to my house. Maybe something had been going on, flirting. Maybe my house wanted more of that.

But then I didn't want to kill my neighbor anymore. Maybe I never had. After all, even if it was true, it didn't change anything. Leaving me for Ralph and just plain leaving weren't any different. Either way, my house still wasn't there. Meanwhile, Ralph kept raking.

So... what could I do? I got that apartment.

Hey, maybe I did move a little quick. So what? I couldn't just stand in the mud forever. I had to stay some place. It was a good apartment, too, the top floor of a turn-of-the-century house—big diamond windows and angled walls from the pitch of the roof. It looked like an urban version of a white barn. This nutty old Czech woman who lived on the lower floor and watched infomercials all day owned it. She never bought anything, but she loved to watch and tell people what garbage they were hocking. She was a fun one.

“It's not so big,” she told me when she showed me around, “but that way you don't have to clean as much. Won't have to throw money away on Oxy-Clean.”

“I don't need much,” I agreed. “I just want a place to sleep and relax.”

The Czech woman *tsked* when I told her I lost my house. Her scraggly red-dyed hair shook. “Such

a terrible thing. Work so hard for something and they take it all for one bad little patch.”

I nodded, but only so I’d get the apartment. I didn’t want to explain. She already suddenly wanted a credit check and a pretty serious deposit, best not to rock the boat more.

At the office, I mainly surfed the Internet. Ever since they’d found out my house left, most of my coworkers didn’t come close. That even included my boss. I guess it was awkward.

“Hi, Phillip,” Marge chirped brightly, leaning into my cubicle. A number of the other middle-aged office hens, all of whom had some strange fascination with coworker lives, clustered behind her, looking concerned. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” I replied, not even bothering to minimize the personals I was scrolling through. They’d be too timid to say anything anyway.

“Well, good,” she said after a moment, apparently baffled that I hadn’t suddenly opened my soul in response to her inane little inquiry. “That’s good to hear,” she pointlessly continued before she and the others withdrew to their usual spot on the other side of a nearby cubicle to loudly whisper about me.

That’s about the most anybody had said to me in a while. They popped by to show their concern, and then scurried away just as quick. Because of that, no one gave me any work to do for a while and no one noticed whether I really did anything. As you can imagine, I hadn’t done much.

I don’t even know why I was reading the personals. I guess I’d already browsed through everything else worth looking at with my sudden leisure time windfall. Regardless, one suddenly caught my attention:

**Young Starter Home Seeks Driven Go-Getter:**

Hey, baby, looking for a gal you can really sink your teeth into? I'm looking for a *real* owner, someone who isn't afraid to get his hands *dirty*. I might be a little high maintenance, but I'll make it worth your while. Interested? Write me and we'll see whether you're up to the *challenge* or not.

The house pictured was mine.

The hen cluster was still whispering around the corner.

So that was the story; it wasn't like I shouldn't have seen it coming. I admitted I had not taken care of my house like I should have, never paid the appropriate attention. Sure, I mowed the grass when I needed to. Well, once in a while. At least, I did when the city sent me demand notices.

I never edged, though. I never did any of the little things showing I was really interested, that I took pride. The eaves never got painted even though the white flaked off and the wood started to rot. All sorts of undone chores seemed neglectful in hindsight, all of a sudden.

The house let herself go as well. Plumbing leaked. The air conditioner didn't cool correctly. I suppose she felt there was no point if I wasn't that concerned.

Really, the surprise wasn't that my house was looking for someone else. It was that she hadn't done it sooner.

Sitting there looking at the ad, I realized I was actually happy that she was out on the market. I'd never been up to the work: changing furnace filters, paying mortgages, wrapping pipes so they didn't freeze, all that. It had been too much, the effort I had to spend

to make things work with my house and me. All that responsibility on me. Frankly, it had been suffocating.

But suddenly I was free. Even though all the work I'd put in was wasted, at least I didn't have to do any more of it. It was never going to work, no matter what. At least moving on cut our losses without losing further.

It was awkward when I eventually went to see an attorney.

"Let me get this straight," the balding little old guy said to me, sitting in his musty downtown office. "You want to sell just the lot and not the house? The house isn't part of this?"

"That's right. The house is gone."

He took off his glasses. "Gone? Where'd it go? Shouldn't you try to get it back before selling? You'd get a whole lot more."

"I'd prefer to just sell the lot," I insisted, and kept on insisting, through all his questioning about insurance policies and such, until he finally gave in and sold the lot for me.

Mind you, he looked at me funny even then.

Personally, I thought it was only fair. She'd never asked me to pay the mortgage or alimony or anything. She still had all the furniture, but it seemed like that was part of her anyway. It didn't seem right to try to take it.

It was quite a long time before I saw her again; years even. Believe me, I wasn't looking. I was just out for a walk in a pleasant upscale neighborhood, affluent and charming beyond my means, down near the river. Suddenly, there she was. Sitting on a double-sized corner lot.

I almost didn't recognize her. She must have done pretty well for herself without me. When we were together she was just another subdivision starter home

sort of place. White-painted wood siding and asphalt shingles, that sort of thing. Cookie-cutter, bland and cheap—just like every other house on the block. Somehow since she'd been on her own, though, she'd developed into a forty-room Tudor mansion with textured plaster and alpine-themed carvings on the eaves.

Frankly, it was only because I'd spent so many years with her that I knew she was my house. The transformation was so drastic, but I knew her anywhere.

For a moment, I thought about going in. I thought I'd just say hello, but at the same time I wasn't the same person anymore. Surely I had changed and things were different. She looked really good. But I thought better of it while standing on the sidewalk. Really, I was still the same guy. I wasn't being truthful with myself if I thought things had changed. I didn't make a scene. Instead, I just kept right on walking.

It was all right. I'd done okay as well. I wasn't a Tudor mansion or anything, but I had a good sound system in that apartment and a very respectable collection of vinyl. I had nothing to worry over and didn't have to work nearly as much as before. Most of my time just rolled by pleasantly, frittering away the afternoons listening to velvet music.

Really, that's all I'd ever wanted. Now everybody's happy.

# LASHONDA KATRICE BARNETT **ezekiel saw the wheel**

*(For ALM)*

Reverend Ezekiel Green squinted at the billboard erected in the field of grass gone way past green, on its way to golden brown in the scorch of Texas sun. Built beyond the church's parking lot three summers ago to catch the eyes of northbound travelers on Martin Luther King Jr. Freeway, he read the sign of his congregants' love for him:

*You who are broken, stop by the potter's house.  
You who need mending, stop by the potter's house.*

*Give him the fragments of your broken life.*

*My friend, the Potter wants to put you back  
together again.*

*You Are Welcome At  
Ephesus Baptist Church  
Sunday Services 11:00 AM*

Every Sunday the august Reverend Green sang the billboard's lyric in a raspy baritone as he welcomed strangers to join his church family or extended a sure hand to the young on their first step toward baptism. "The Potter's House," his signature tune and for many the high point of church service, held within its altered chords his testimony: a man not only beaten by life but broken by it at every juncture: boyhood without a father; manhood without a mother; and now a loss so senseless he could not think of what to call it. For the last several months Sister Lou Anne

had embellished the song with poignant vamps, repeating phrases on the organ to which he should improvise, share what was in his heart, but he had sung nothing during these luscious provocations, encouraging the choir to, "tell the church about it." The revving sound of motors hummed past as he unfastened his seatbelt, doubt lingering like the last bit of green on the Ephesus lawn. He stood beside his Lincoln Town Car, a gift from his congregation, or as they had put it, a cherry to top all of the Sundays he had given them. The red car in the 10,000 square foot parking lot gleamed like a ruby on a jeweler's black cloth.

The numbers of the recent membership count amazed him; at one thousand and twelve the congregation had grown by one hundred and eighty-two in a single year. After thirty-three years they were still coming. More important, no one left. No one ever left Ephesus unless they moved to a distant city or went to meet their Maker. For these reasons the church board fought hard against his resignation. Several members questioned why he wanted to leave. Sister Hattie Grayson asked if he was sick. He assured them that the Lord was keeping him in good health. Remembering how Reverend Green had given them a loan for the purchase of their first house, Deacon Grayson dropped his head and stammered, "Ain't right then." They reminded the Reverend of his anointing; said they were sure God wanted and needed to use him, still. They warned him that he wouldn't know what to do with himself during retirement because he was put here to preach, and that was just all there was to it. Ezekiel listened for two hours; it seemed his great-aunt had been right long ago when she said, "Boy, you talented at religion." She had seen it in him when he was ten years old. Sitting

on the porch snapping peas one Saturday evening, she waited until he finished reciting the tenth Beatitude and said to him with a face full of pride and seriousness, a face that nearly scared him, "Boy you fixing to move a lot of hearts and change a few minds if you keep on with that Bible speak." He didn't know what she meant, but he figured talent—any kind of talent—was a good thing.

Reverend Green fumbled for the right key under a purple awning that led to brass-framed stained-glass doors of red and gold. He stepped into the frigid vestibule. At the end of the hallway, before the stairs that led to the sanctuary, he stopped in front of the office door where his nameplate had been removed. "Pringle." He repeated the new Senior Pastor's name, "Reverend Winston Pringle," grateful that the congregants and Church Board were of one accord in their election. Foolishly he thought the ease with which they had chosen a new shepherd would make turning over his flock easier. But how could it ever be easy when his life had started there?

The way the story had been told to him it was a hundred and four degrees the Sunday Reverend J. B. Tucker preached the sermon that filled the unborn baby with the Holy Spirit. The mother-to-be disrupted her row, stepping on the toes of people rocking to Reverend Tucker's sermon. She waddled down the steps to the bathroom, where she discovered it wasn't urine that wet her dress. Another flutter came, stronger than the one she felt at the start of the sermon. She leaned against the stall door, both hands on her belly, concentrating on the minister's voice issuing from the speaker mounted high in the corner above her head: "See there was these dried bones laying around and God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the

bones. Told him to tell the bones 'I will make breath enter you.' Well, Ezekiel said what God told him to say, and you know them bones started rattlin' together... and flesh appeared on them... but there was no life in them. So, God told Ezekiel to command the bones again, except this time to add 'Lord' to it. So Ezekiel said, 'The Lord make breath enter you.' And breath entered the bones and Ezekiel had him a whole army." An usher entered the bathroom, exclaiming at the strange sight: two thick legs jutting below a stall door. She found Ruth Green propped against the toilet, twisting and panting her way through the final stage of labor. The story made it all the way to Houston, even crossed Louisiana's state line—Reverend J. B. Tucker preached so hard and so good, pregnant women gave birth in the church basement.

Ezekiel Green's fondest memories were all born in that place. As a boy he had liked to lean his head against the billowy bosom—damp from perspiration—of his great-aunt who smelled of rosewater and butterscotch candy, enveloping him with one meaty arm while fanning them both with the other hand. Church elders often asked him, "Boy, you love the Lord?" A question to which Ezekiel always nodded yes. On Sundays, everyone waited cheerfully in bathroom lines, making happy small talk: Girl, you sure are wearing that hat! Or: Nice suit Mister So-and-So. Or: you must be feeling good cause Lord knows you look it. Ezekiel thought of his own manners, exemplary on Sundays. "Yes Ma'ams" and "No Sirs" came easy since, dressed in their very best, Ephesus members really did look like something. Church brought out the best in everybody. And it brought out something else too that as a child Ezekiel could not articulate. He had noticed that during the week his mother

had no joy, made evident by the persistent furrowed brow and words that stumbled midway through a sentence, causing her to re-order her thoughts like so: “Ezekiel, you need to come straight home from school tomorrow. Don’t stop and play nowhere cause... I’m losing my mind. What was I about to say... oh yes, cause I need you to run some errands for me.”

Momma worried a lot. Sometimes she raised her voice at him or at no one and complained about things of no real consequence, like running out of milk or coming to the end of the aluminum foil. During the week all of these things added up, winding her so tightly that by Sunday morning she snapped. Ezekiel watched from his place in the third pew next to his great-aunt as his mother, seated in the first row of the choir, came undone. Sometimes it started during Reverend Tucker’s sermon. She’d begin to rock slowly back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes it started during a choir member’s solo—her shoulders hunching up and down repeatedly, like the valves of his trumpet. No matter how it began, it wasn’t long before his mother’s tears flowed like wine at the Cana wedding.

On most Sundays Ezekiel waited for his mother in the vestibule after the benediction. She took her time disrobing and socializing with the other choir members in the room he was not allowed to enter. When she found him, choir robe covered snugly in plastic flung over her arm and lipstick freshly applied, he always gave her a tight squeeze around the waist. Then he’d ask the same question: “Momma, why do you cry?”

“Aw, baby,” she would say, flashing a bright smile he would not see again for seven whole days.

In middle school Ezekiel looked to the men of the church for lessons on how to become a man. No one

knew the whereabouts of his own father, and his mother forbade him from playing outside of the pool hall, let alone going inside. She even escorted him to the barbershop. So, Deacon Grayson, who taught him how to knot his tie better than his mother could, took him aside when he got to be eleven or twelve and told him he was big enough to get a paper route and start keeping a little change on him. Mr. Kilson, an usher, had unknowingly taught him a thing or two about deportment. The young Ezekiel liked the way he walked and stood and made subtle gestures with his hands when he spoke. The janitor and groundskeeper, Mr. Simmons, who always completed a thought with, "Mind your momma, boy," had told him when he started his last year of high school, "When you meet a nice lady just think of all she's had to do to become that way and don't you do nothing to make her hard work in vain. In other words, if you can't add to her, leave her alone. But be a man, don't take nothing away from her."

On a full scholarship from the University of Texas, Ezekiel earned a degree in political science. Angry with God for taking his great-aunt and mother during his first year, he had rethought declaring religion for a major. Tucked away in the back of his mind, though, was the awareness that practically every black male politician was also a preacher so he was still surreptitiously on track should he decide to call a truce with God.

In Austin he met Iyantha, a student at Huston-Tillotson College visiting UT to inquire about their graduate program in education. He saw his wife-to-be on the steps of Blanton Hall, and forgot where he was headed. They were married after she completed the program, and moved to Dallas where Ezekiel enrolled

at the Dallas Bible Institute. His thesis, on the epistles of Paul, cemented his love of the apostle's writings and inspired the naming of the only child Iyantha would give him. The summer of his son's birth he attended the annual Ephesus Baptist Church picnic, where Reverend Tucker pulled him to the side.

"There's a calling on your life, Ezekiel. Been there ever since you were born. What are you plans now?"

"I don't exactly have a plan—except we like this area and plan to stay. I suspect I'll find a job and wait until a post opens up for me at one of the churches."

"I imagine you been real prayerful about the situation. Trusting in the Lord with all thine heart, leaning not to thy own understanding, like the Good Book says. While you thinking and praying on it though, I wanna tell you Reverend Mack is leaving the church. He's moving to Oklahoma City to lead his own congregation. I'll be without an assistant pastor. The post is yours if you want it." Thirty-four years ago Ezekiel had accepted the assistant pastorship and when Reverend Tucker died of a heart attack one year later the decision was unanimous: the church voted in the preacher born in the basement.

Under Ezekiel's leadership Ephesus prospered: remodeling begun under Rev. J.B. Tucker was completed, the thirty-one-year mortgage burned; church staff expanded, and a newsletter launched; a motor coach and several buses purchased; national and international conventions hosted; and a radio broadcast aired live every Sunday. Recently, they had purchased the retreat facility they had rented for years.

For four years the church's Women's Guild had sold dinners in order to raise money for a child care center that would serve not only their congregation,

but the entire community. Even those who deigned not to set foot in the church on Sunday signed the waiting list. Something about their child being in a church day care made them feel safe. One morning Ezekiel dropped by unannounced. A little past nine in the morning, a woman entered wearing a tube top and pair of Daisy Duke shorts, with a can of beer in one hand and her little girl's hand in the other. A teacher who had just ended her tour with the reverend gave him a wide-eyed look of concern. He couldn't help but see his own granddaughter in the little girl, so he smiled at the teacher and motioned for her to welcome the mother and child. "That child needs us," Ezekiel said. "All you have to do is look at the momma to see the child's need. If there isn't room, make room for that one."

When the young people left in droves for whatever pubescent Christians do on Sunday mornings after they quit the church, Ezekiel decided to fight fire with fire. He prayed for an answer, a way to lure his teenagers back to church. One evening while flipping through the channels, he paused at BET to watch a rap video. If he ignored the degrading words, he understood why the youngsters found the music exciting—hard not to with the relentless beats and all the flash of the rappers. The next morning he called Ms. Young, a music teacher at the high school, and asked her to start a teen Christian rap group. He suggested she encourage the young people to write their own rap lyrics at choir rehearsal and to use the Bible as their source. He purchased video equipment so they could make music videos at the church. When Ms. Young approached him with the kids' idea to make a CD, he consented so long as all proceeds established the Ephesus Baptist Church College Fund. And that

was how he went from being Reverend Green, with twenty-four teenagers in a congregation of nearly seven hundred, to MC (Missionary for Christ) Zeke, as the young folks, whose numbers quickly surpassed 100, called him.

Now, Ezekiel took a seat in the corner of the last pew in the spot he had often sat to have a little talk with God. Before him water flowed into the baptismal pool from a recent installation—gilded pitchers held by three gold-plated cherubs, behind them the setting sun's orange glow illuminated the crucifixion scene on the stained-glass window. He squeezed his eyes shut on a now painful image engraved on his memory: the frightened and beautiful face of his granddaughter looking at him with the starriest eyes he'd ever seen. Together they stood in the baptismal pool, Tasha trembling as the water that only reached her grandfather's waist bobbed against her chin. Ezekiel placed one hand behind her back. Tasha crossed her arms over her chest as she had been told in rehearsal. "Father God, I give this child to you," he began, laying the other hand across her forehead and then slowly pushing her back. "She was one of yours," he said now in a voice so weak he did not recognize it as his own. "And yet you forsook her."

Ezekiel looked at his watch, then around the church, and way up in the rafters above the baptismal pool where he saw Iyantha. There was no material likeness of her anywhere but he saw her just as plain. He blamed it on his thinking, he had thought hard about her lately. She was hurting just the same as him but he had felt too empty to give her anything to help. He wiped his eyes but Iyantha was still way up there, hovering over the baptismal pool. He saw this as the will of God, and kept looking until he could see him-

self, too, beside her in a way that he had not been for months. Maybe even years. Yes, he had made the right decision. Leaving Ephesus would be good for them even if it was good for nobody else.

Six months ago the decision to leave his post as Senior Pastor had wrenched his conscience. “I’m going to run this race for the Lord for as long as He sees fit,” had been his vow to Iyantha over the years, steeped in the belief that he had a special anointing from the Lord; there could be no other explanation for the fire he felt when he preached. Ezekiel entered a pact with God: should his trust in him flicker or the flame of his passion for The Word dwindle to an ember, he would no longer preach the gospel, though he could not fathom either would come to pass.

A telephone call from his son relaying the Saturday afternoon visit from a pair of Casualty Assistance Calls Officers broke the pact. The CACOs notified Paul and Cheryl of Tasha’s death. A roadside bomb, which the men had referred to as an improvised explosive device, went off as her convoy passed Fallujah. With no words of comfort for his son, Ezekiel simply handed the phone to Iyantha. Alone in his study, he looked down on his desk at the reply he had begun in response to his granddaughter’s latest letter. He removed Tasha’s letter from his Bible where he’d tucked it to inspire a future sermon. From the front of the house he heard Iyantha cry out “Lord Jesus. Lord Jesus,” as he read:

Dear Paw Paw,

Yesterday I saw two young boys get shot down outside of a mosque. They looked to be about fourteen or fifteen. It is hard to see something like that and not question your faith. I

don't mean to disappoint you but I'm writing to you because of all people, you can help me stay strong while I'm over here. I have not seen other people get killed like I saw those two boys but the gunshots and explosions go on all of the time. Somebody told me you learn not to hear it but I've been here seven weeks and I still do. I have a friend here, a girl from Midland. And Ricky and I talk or write letters as much as we can. I have seen him once. He's holding it together in Baghdad. He's changed a lot, Paw Paw. Hard to believe he's been over here a year. When we talk I try to focus on the future, our wedding plans.

I tell Ricky it'll help to look forward to life after this. He says it won't. Don't worry though. You'll get your great-grands one of these days.

This morning when I woke up the day was all orange, the sky and everything. It was beautiful, and then the shots rang out and I thought of the two young boys from yesterday. When I look around here I think of the pictures I had in my mind of biblical places when I was little. I remember looking at those maps at the back of the Bible you gave me when I was baptized. I think some of the places back then must've looked like this.

How is everybody at Ephesus? I miss you and I miss grandma—especially her chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes and pecan pie. Please tell her I said so. And, please pray for me. Pray for us all.

Love, Tasha.

Despite his wife's grief, the news was not real for Ezekiel until drinking his morning coffee over the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* two days later. Even then, he did not react but excused himself from the table to

retrieve a pair of scissors from his study. Upon his return, he clipped out a tiny portion from the paper that read "Pfc. Tasha L. Green, 20, Fort Worth, Texas, Died in convoy attack in Fallujah, Iraq, May 27."

When her body was flown from Iraq to Dallas/Fort Worth International, the four of them—his wife, son and daughter-in-law—were present to greet it. They held hands on the airport tarmac as two soldiers appeared in the doorway of the plane, lifting a casket clothed in red, white, and blue. Paul released hands first, bending at the waist and covering his face. He moaned loudly while his stammering wife pummeled his back with her fists. "Paul, no. That's not my baby in there. That ain't none-a Tasha. That's not our baby in there!" Iyantha turned her back on the scene, dropping her head in a silent cry. Only Ezekiel stood tall as the flag-draped coffin moved down the conveyor belt toward his torn family. In that moment his flame for the gospel flickered and died.

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A few nights later Iyantha was sharing a light-hearted story about one of the kids in vacation Bible school, spooning mashed potatoes onto her husband's plate, when Ezekiel raised his voice impatiently. "Don't give me so many—save some for Tasha." He pushed back from the table and sat staring into his lap for a long time then said in a low voice, "Lord, help me."

Ephesus had witnessed many funerals, but never before had the deceased been a soldier. Two officers from Fort Hood's 4th Infantry Division presented a folded flag to Paul and Cheryl as a recording of "Taps"

played over the church P.A. system. The congregation grieved hard for the pastor and his family. Their tidings, in the form of flowers, food, cards and money, did not stop for weeks. Not until Ezekiel addressed them: "Saints, the Green family appreciates your thoughtful gestures and loving gifts during our difficult hour, but there is no reason to continue. We accept the Lord's will and do not want to offend the Almighty's judgment with our grief. To do so is to send the message that we don't trust the Lord's infinite wisdom. I believe that the Lord called Tasha home early for a reason. We are glad that she is with her Maker."

They had expected a fiery anti-war sermon fueled by his granddaughter's death, but in the subsequent Sundays Ezekiel's preaching cooled to lukewarm teachings from the Old Testament. And even then he struggled to give them a positive word to take away. His private prayers changed. Where he had always used prayer to offer praises and thanksgiving, he now used them for inquiry. He asked the Lord to please make sense of Tasha's death for him, to reveal to him how he should serve and lead the church with so little hope and so much confusion. When the answers didn't come, he prayed more fervently, asking for patience like Job's. With this patience he ministered to the church for six months after his granddaughter's death.

\*\*\*

His last Sunday morning as Senior Pastor, Ezekiel knelt at the first step of the pulpit and whispered the same short prayer he had sent up to the Lord for thirty-three years. "Dear Lord, edify the words of my

mouth so that they may be acceptable in thy sight.” Once seated in the giant oak chair on the pulpit that rose dramatically above the congregation, Sister Lou Anne struck an organ key. The Assistant Pastor rose from one of the two smaller chairs flanking the Reverend and spoke into the microphone, “Those of you who are able, please rise.”

The rustling of church bulletins, fans, Bibles and pocketbooks accompanied Sister Lou Anne’s prelude. At the rear of the church two sets of double doors in opposite corners flew open. No sight pleased Ezekiel more than the one hundred choir members swaying into the sanctuary in kelly green robes as vibrant as late spring with flowing gold satin sashes bright as the sun. Their voices robust and cheerful, they marched, bouncing a little on the left foot and then the right, right hands held in the air, left hands behind their backs. He recalled how in the past he had felt like a king as they closed in around him, his faithful and loving soldiers. That Sunday the feeling almost returned when their mouths opened so wide, yearning to please their Master and him too. Today more than any other Sunday he felt they wanted to reach him with their song; his favorite tenor belting from the back of the line; the organ, bass and drums locking the congregation in rollicking rhythm as the choir swelled to heightened frenzy (my word, Iyantha would say later, they wanted to send the roof flying off!):

*Step to Jesus and everything will be all right,  
Step to Jesus he'll be your guiding light;  
Step to Jesus all your battles he will help you fight,  
Step to Jesus he'll make everything all right;  
If you feel you can't go on, pray the Lord*

*will make you strong;  
A heart-fixer is he, there is nothing  
he does not see...*

When the choir filed into their pews behind the pulpit, Ezekiel approached the lectern to begin the responsive reading. As a child, Tasha had enjoyed this portion of the service the most. Even as the church grew to seven hundred, he could hear her voice, uniquely robust for a little girl, reading above all of the others.

“This morning’s responsive reading comes from Psalm 27, verses one through four, ten, and thirteen.” He had given the Psalm of Protection to Tasha before she left for Iraq. He closed his eyes, recited from memory. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” Soft Amens rippled through the congregation. “When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.” These words weighted his heart now. He wondered if Tasha had been confident in her last hour. Had the faith she questioned in her letter returned?

“For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me: he shall set me up upon a rock.” So he had promised but it was not so. He had not set Tasha upon a rock.

Baskets for tithes and offerings changed hands quickly down each row while Sister Lou Anne played softly. Ezekiel started to sing: “There’s pow’r in the

blood, pow'r in the blood." And the congregants followed with: "There's won-der-work-ing pow'r, in the blood (in the blood) of the lamb. There's pow'r, pow'r, won-der-work-ing pow'r in the pre-rious blood of the lamb." They repeated the song many times, as though casting a spell. Those who entered a trance did so not only by singing along but by recalling the delicious memory of their deliverance. When all the baskets were carried to the front of the church by men and women in black suits, green ties and brilliant white gloves, Sister Lou Anne played the doxology and everyone's voices rose, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow..."

The deacons disappeared through sidedoors with the baskets overflowing with checks and cash as Ezekiel began a prayer of thanksgiving: "Father, I stretch my hands to Thee. No other help I know. If Thou withdraw Thyself from me, O whither shall I go?"

During his sermon, Iyantha watched closely. She paid little attention to what her husband said, so rapt was she in her prayer that he make it through the sermon all right. He had tossed and turned during the night like the ship carrying Jonah, ate breakfast silently, and only checked to make sure her seatbelt was fastened in the car on the too quiet drive to church. She had placed her hand over his on the steering wheel when they pulled into the church parking lot. "You can stay on as Pastor Emeritus," she'd said. "I'm sure they'd allow it. You are so loved." He grunted that his work for the Lord had ended.

The soft drone of central air conditioning, an intermittent "Amen," cough, or an infant's cry of discomfort was heard beneath the amplified voice of the preacher. Ezekiel fumbled through the sermon, repeating himself often, wiping his eyes. His faithful

sent up prayers of their own that Reverend Green would have a change of heart.

The lights dimmed in the main vestibule as Deacon Hayward, charged with lighting the five-foot candelabra near both pulpit entrances, went to work. Ezekiel and Reverend Pringle began the ritual preparation of the wine and bread while the church softly sang: "Let us break bread together on our knees (on our knees)..." When the last communion takers returned to their seats, Iyantha sat down at the piano. She accompanied her husband on "The Potter's House" sung during the invitation to discipleship. During the last month many longtime members had used this time to request special prayer. They walked to the front of the church below the pulpit where the minister stood and whispered in his ear the details of their family issues, financial worries or health problems. But in four Sundays no one had accepted his invitation to join the church, which Ezekiel read as a sign that God no longer had intentions to use him.

He concluded the verse with closed eyes, unaware of the young woman leaving her seat for the red-carpeted aisle that would lead her to him. "No more than twenty," he thought as he pulled her close. His shoulders curled toward her, his knees bent in order to lay his head in the crook of her perfumed neck. In this pose, he whimpered like a baby fighting his sleep. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jeeeeesus," his voice quivered into the tiny microphone clipped on his robe. To bear up under the weight of the man was too much for the petite woman whose knees trembled, sending Iyantha from the piano bench to her husband's side.

Iyantha's hand on his back, Ezekiel finally released the young woman. Sweat rushed from his brow

as he offered the stranger a sad smile. “Are you here to accept the Lord as your personal savior?” His words sounded like gravel. The young woman gulped hard, “Yes.” He did not ask the young woman’s name, where she was from, or any of the questions usually directed at new members. “Bless your heart. Do you accept the Lord as your personal savior?” The young woman looked to Deacon Grayson standing nearby. In three months of visits to Ephesus she had not seen Reverend Green ask anyone this question twice. In a high-pitched and tearful voice he repeated, “Do you accept the Lord as your personal savior?” Iyantha peeled away her husband’s hand from the young woman’s shoulder, clasping it in her own. “Ezekiel. Ezekiel. It’s all right now, honey. It’s all right,” the congregation overheard as the microphone caught all of the whisper. She motioned for Deacon Grayson to help her lead her husband away as Reverend Pringle stepped up to the lectern.

# **CORY BRADLEY**

## **silent sonata**

“I did not expect to see you again,” says the Japanese luthier in her careful English.

Despite being twice Ven’s age, Madame Sappho is unsettlingly beautiful, with only fine lines gracing her eyes and mouth. Whether her retained beauty is due to her ethnicity or the harmony she herself peddles, Ven isn’t sure, but his attraction is fierce all the same.

Under Ven’s scrutiny, Sappho tightens her silk nightgown about her. “You in trouble, Mr. Ven?”

Ven does not need to answer.

Without another word, Sappho leads Ven across her workshop. A narrow aisle has formed between the instruments cluttering the floor and those hanging from the ceiling, waiting to be tended to like carcasses in an abattoir.

Behind a curtained partition is a corridor with a stairwell leading to Sappho’s modest home. At the foot of the stairs is a simple rug of woven straw. Sappho nudges the rug away with her foot and pries open the trapdoor beneath with her toes. Ven descends into the den first and Sappho follows, closing the hatch behind her.

The familiar sights and smells of the basement comfort Ven. From exposed rafters hang candle lanterns with panes of hand-painted glass projecting a flourish of ornate shadows around the room. Sweet sandalwood smoke wisps from incense sticks smoldering within the walls and the dusty strokes of a

straw broom streak the stone floor.

Three of the five beds are currently in use, as evidenced by the silent silhouettes shifting behind traditional wood-and-paper shoji screens. Madame Sappho leads Ven to the bed in the corner and washes her hands in a basin sink before wheeling close a tuning table. The rolling cart consists of four ivory tuning pegs in each corner, a fingerboard of polished ebony and a lower shelf with an array of spooled wire of varying weights.

Without consulting Ven, Sappho begins to unravel a length of the lightest silver wire, as fine as sewing thread.

“Sappho,” Ven argues in a quiet whisper, “I can’t afford anything more expensive than steel.”

“Shhh,” Sappho scolds. “Take off your shirt.”

Ven does not argue further. As he unbuttons his uniform, Sappho prepares three additional lengths of silver, each the same length as the first but of slightly increasing weight.

Ven removes his coat and folds it neatly beside the bed. He is hesitant to doff his undershirt. His chest is young, his muscles not as defined as he would like them to be. With a disapproving click of her tongue, Sappho orders the shirt to come off and Ven reluctantly complies.

“How deep you want to go?” Sappho asks.

“Just under the skin,” he answers. Ven knows the effect will not last as long as if Sappho played directly into his muscles, but he does not want to resonate. Not tonight.

Sappho nods and retrieves a hollowed needle the length of Ven’s forearm from a bowl of alcohol. She wipes it dry and lowers the tuning table level with Ven’s bed and secures the wheels. “Lay down.”

Ven turns onto his stomach, his torso cooled by the chill of the freshly laundered sheets. Sappho feels the scarring tissue of healing incisions on Ven's lower back and slides the tapered end of the needle painlessly beneath his skin.

Ven focuses on the cold, clean metal sliding inside his back and Sappho's callused fingertips as she guides the needle over his muscles and along his ribs. Just short of Ven's right shoulder blade, Sappho leads the needle out again and threads the finest of the silver wires through its hollowed length. She then delicately pulls the tube from Ven's back, leaving the silver strand in place.

Sappho wipes the needle clean of blood and sterilizes it before repeating the process three more times. When the four wires are in position, they are perfectly parallel, two on either side of Ven's spine.

Content with the surgery, Sappho caps the exposed ends of the wires with porcelain beads then begin to tune the strings, winding each tight around an ivory peg. With every twist of increasing tension, the wires tug uncomfortably beneath Ven's skin.

Unnecessarily, Sappho fingers the strings to ensure they are perfectly tuned. Ven shivers pleasantly as the vibrations are absorbed by his body, a sensation unlike anything else.

“What piece?” Sappho asks.

“The Archangel's Judgement,” Ven answers without hesitation. *Because by this time tomorrow, I will probably be dead.*

Ven readies his body with a long breath.

With the skilled hands of a lifelong musician, Sappho begins, effortlessly plying the fingerboard and plucking the silver strings, infusing Ven's skin with a silent sonata.

# **THOMAS COWELL**

## **better late than never**

They meet while traveling.

And find that they're both from Seattle.

This geographic coincidence bonds them more than attraction, at first, at least for one of them.

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It's at one of the Venice Beach hostels that they meet.

That evening, before sunset, they wander into a corner store together to buy wine.

When they return to the hostel they go straight up to the third-floor balcony where, between glimpses of the setting sun, they return to the subject of Seattle, naming bars and restaurants, cafes, public parks.

Then she tells him that after high school she moved to Texas for college, and that she's been in Texas almost two years now.

“Why Texas?” he asks, picturing parched lizards and prickly cactuses.

He also pictures deserts bleeding into horizons, and cowboys toting silver revolvers.

She shrugs.

She's the sort of young woman one gets the feeling has seen and done some things.

She wears a stylish brown scarf that matches her hair with zero remorse.

The rest of her get-up looks as if it's been stripped off a Buffalo Exchange mannequin.

He guesses without asking that she's majoring in something unapologetically artsy.

\*\*\*

She takes a swig from her wine bottle, and he does the same.

She asks him why he chose Venice Beach for his travel destination, and he answers that he doesn't really know why, that it just seemed like a cool place to check out.

She nods and sips her wine again, looking thoughtful, wise beyond her years in the shadowed light.

He tells her about how he hadn't left Seattle after high school, that he's been attending The University of Washington for the past three years now.

Without knowing why he tells her that he's majoring in macroeconomics.

He thinks he sees the muscles of her face twitch, but decides it could just be a trick of the dim lighting.

There are lots of things he doesn't tell her.

He doesn't tell her that apart from two other virgins, a guy and a girl, his grades are at the top in all his classes.

He doesn't tell her that his parents paid for the entirety of this trip, from the flight to the hostel to food to toothpaste.

He doesn't tell her that he has his dad's platinum rewards card stashed securely in his wallet.

He doesn't tell her that he still lives with his parents, or that he's never not lived with his parents.

He doesn't tell her he's never held a real job.

Or that he'd gone on this trip alone, despite his parents' concerns, in order to prove something to himself, or to find or learn something.

The thought of losing his virginity hardly crosses his mind.

He's given up on the idea.

\*\*\*

She takes another swig from her wine bottle, and he does the same.

He doesn't tell her that he's developed a bit of a complex over the last few years thanks to feeling like an invalid both on campus and off.

Or about how he deeply regrets not having partaken in the normal high school shenanigans: drugs, alcohol, girls.

Naturally, he does his best to hide these things from her.

Naturally, he assumes she'll see through him before the night's over.

Naturally, his assumption is partially wrong and partially right.

\*\*\*

She takes another swig from her wine bottle, and he does the same.

He doesn't tell her about *Jeopardy*, which his parents watch religiously.

He doesn't tell her that he watches *Jeopardy* religiously with his parents.

He doesn't tell her that he has a three-year subscription to *The Economist*.

He tells her about Green Lake.

He doesn't tell her about the poems he's written about Green Lake.

\*\*\*

She takes another swig from her wine bottle, and he does the same.

Then she fixes him with a look.

It's a look that turns his world upside down.

It's a look he's never before been the recipient of.

He knows he'll leave everything for her now.

He knows he'll do anything she asks of him now.

He knows he'll go anywhere with her now if only she'd ask.

Which leads to what she does ask, not thirty minutes later, once both bottles of wine are finished.

“Want to go to Vegas with me? I've got a car.”

\*\*\*

He offers to help drive, but she says she can't stand being docile in a car.

The word “docile” makes him think of kittens playing with yarn.

She calls herself a control freak as though stating a fact.

Loud music plays from the car speakers, and with the windows down the muggy desert air parachutes their clothes and tickles their forearms.

He tries stealing glances at her thighs from time to time.

Tries, because she notices each time.

The stretch of tanned flesh below her jean cutoffs keeps giving him the start of a hard-on.

Not a hard hard-on, just the start of one.

To keep it from reaching lift-off, he stares out the window at the scenery and pretends that what he sees is more interesting than it really is.

\*\*\*

He doesn't know what to expect once they get to Vegas, except the standard bright lights and endless casinos.

He guesses they'll find another hostel for the night.

That is if they have hostels in Vegas.

He doesn't know.

He hopes they don't.

The thought of sharing a hotel room, a bed with this stranger sitting next to him makes him dizzy.

\*\*\*

They stop for gas on the Nevada side of the California/Nevada border.

He volunteers to pump.

He takes some money from his pocket and hands her a twenty.

“Thanks,” she says, and then goes inside the store.

She comes back out with a bottle of vodka and a bottle of Squirt and a bottle of water.

Also two Styrofoam coffee cups.

“Play bartender?” she says, grinning, and hands him the bag.

\*\*\*

Back in the car, back on the road, as he pours the first set of drinks he thinks of his parents.

He thinks about what they'd think if they knew what he was up to.

He thinks briefly of the fable “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” before handing her one of the cups.

“Gracias,” she says, taking the cup without turning her head.

She sips her coffee cup and he does the same.

He thinks he should feel bad, guilty or something.

He thinks he feels a little bad, a little guilty, but he mostly just feels other things.

\*\*\*

It's late when he spots the first lights of Vegas.

It's been dark for hours now in every direction.

He's tired.

She's tired.

Even the music sounds tired.

They don't talk.

This fact gives him the repeated thought that this tag-along to Vegas might've been a mistake, that she might be having second thoughts about inviting him.

He can feel the three cups of vodka & Squirt he'd ingested sloshing around in his gut as he imagines a quiet room with a comfortable bed with the both of them in it.

His heart quickens at the thought.

What would he do?

What wouldn't he do?

Would she find out?

What would she do if she found out?

Laugh?

Heckle?

Scold?

Advise?

\*\*\*

“I booked a hotel room for the night,” she says before exiting the freeway.

A whirlwind of feelings suddenly interrogate his body.

“A cool thing about Vegas is that the hotels are dirt-cheap,” she says.

“Really?” he says.

“A lot of them are as cheap as hostels, because they expect you to blow your dough gambling.”

Last night, at the Venice hostel, she’d asked him if he’d ever been to Vegas before, and he’d said no.

“You don’t look like the Vegas type,” she’d said, and all he could do was nod in agreement.

“What about you?” he’d asked.

“Never been either,” she’d said.

He’d nodded again, and she’d said, “There’s a first time for everything,” and soon they got up from their seats on the third-floor balcony to go back inside.

\*\*\*

The hotel is a few miles from the Strip.

It’s fifteen stories tall, with a row of magenta lights spanning the top and both sides to help it stand out against the hotels it’s squeezed between.

“How much is this place?” he asks as she veers into the parking lot.

“Twenty-four a night,” she says.

“How many nights?”

He’s amazed with himself for not having asked such questions sooner, like before he’d hopped in the car with her in California.

“Four,” she says, squeezing into a parking spot.

“And then what?” he asks.

She puts the car in park, turns off the ignition and looks at him.

“And then I’m driving back to Austin.”

He nods his head stupidly.

“Didn’t I tell you all this?” she says.

“No,” he says, “I think I forgot to ask.”

She laughs, says, “What have you gotten yourself into?”

He doesn’t have an answer.

\*\*\*

Their room is on the ninth floor.

There’s a view of the pool below.

In the distance are a surprisingly small number of lights scattered about.

The dark loneliness of the desert seems to speak to him in a language that chills his bones.

He turns around and sees she’s disappeared into the bathroom.

Her backpack, probably the same one she uses for school, he imagines, sits open at the foot of one of the beds, while his rests against the side of the wooden television stand.

The two beds seem to pose a problem—one would’ve made things simpler, he thinks.

He goes over to the bed opposite the one she’s claimed with her backpack, and lies flat on his back.

He cups his head in his hands and waits.

He hears the toilet flush.

Soon she emerges with a toothbrush in her mouth, the side-to-side movement of her hand almost ferocious.

He notices her notice him.

The notice is meant to be subtle and unassuming,

except nothing feels subtle and unassuming when you find yourself in a hotel room with a stranger.

She's still wearing her jean cutoffs and faded flower print chiffon, but now, lying there, he imagines her naked and quickly feels another hard-on coming on.

She disappears back into the bathroom, and he envisions flying sheep and cows in an effort to reduce the first stages of his hard-on.

It works, and when she comes back out of the bathroom he gets out of bed and goes over to his backpack to find his toiletry things.

He walks into the bathroom, trying to act very natural about everything.

\*\*\*

When he comes out of the bathroom, maybe five minutes later, the lights are off and she's in bed.

Only she's in the one he'd claimed.

His heart suddenly quickens.

What should he do?

Is this some sort of test?

Does this mean she wants him to join her?

Or did she unthinkingly choose this bed to sleep on?

He starts, slowly, towards the empty bed.

He sits on the side of it and looks at her.

Already under the sheets, she's got her back to him.

He sees her clothes, her jean cutoffs and the flower print chiffon, draped across an arm of the chair in the corner by the window.

He pulls his khaki shorts from his waist down to his feet, steps out of them.

He stands back up and moves over to the window, pulling the curtains together until only a narrow gap

separates the two.

He moves back over to the empty bed, sits, then pulls back the covers and lies down.

It feels good to lie down, he's tired, it's after midnight, but knowing that she's in the adjacent bed, so close, so silent, he can't keep his eyes shut.

Is she asleep?

Maybe ten seconds later he gets an answer in the form of words.

"Won't you join me?" he hears.

Her voice is soft, inviting.

"All right," he says, trying to sound manly, like he doesn't much care either way, like he's been with hundreds of women as hot as the sun.

He pulls the covers away and sits back up.

He starts forward with his hands, cautiously feeling the surface of the other bed.

Finding the covers, he slips under them.

She's still on her side, her back to him.

Then she turns onto her back, and he can feel her looking at him, in the dark.

Their bodies are so close he can feel the warmth coming off them.

She's the first to touch him, and after that, the rest seems to follow rather naturally.

\*\*\*

He wakes to an empty bed, and the soft sound of a running shower.

I can't believe it, he thinks to himself.

I'm no longer a virgin, he thinks.

My life begins today, he thinks.

She comes out with a towel wrapped snug around her.

“Good morning,” she says, smiling.

“Morning,” he says.

With one hand holding her towel tight she picks up her backpack and takes it into the bathroom.

He gets out of bed and takes his phone out of his backpack.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he finds a couple of texts from his mom, also a missed call with a voice message.

He checks the texts.

How are you liking California? the first one reads.

Please text me back so I know you’re ok, the second one reads.

Sam, dad and I are getting worried, the third one reads.

He shuts his eyes and lowers his head.

For the first time in his life he feels a surge of warm resentment directed at his parents.

For the first time in his life he feels a similar surge of resentment directed at himself, for never having retaliated in the slightest against his parents.

For the first time in his life he sees his parents as people rather than parents.

All the living he’ll have to make up looks improbably impossible.

Instead of looking bright, his future suddenly looks desolate, like the desert hills outside the window.

When she comes back out of the bathroom she says, “Penny slots and cocktails?”

Looking at her, he smiles and nods his head.

“You read my mind,” he says.

# **LIBBY CUDMORE**

## **white van summer**

Paulina and I were eight the summer those girls went missing. Penny O'Dell, from Connecticut, was only two years older than us when she was snatched off the street biking home from tennis practice. Sarah Bennett, fifteen and working at a day camp in Lake George, was last seen getting into a white van on a back road two miles from the camp. Her picture was plastered on every tollbooth, every rest stop door, every grocery store corkboard. I saw her pretty face, her bubble of dark hair, when I closed my eyes at night.

We were fascinated by their disappearance. We put them on the prayer list at church and asked Jesus to protect them when we said our prayers at night. We watched the news with our dads before dinner and cut out newspaper clippings to glue in Mead notebooks with theories and lists. Paulina's dad let her watch *Law & Order* with him and she read all the Nancy Drew books the library had. She was going to be a detective when she grew up.

Our parents and the policeman with the black dog warned us to stay away from white vans and men we didn't know, to always walk in pairs and to ask for the secret code if a stranger said our mom or dad sent him to pick us up. Easy stuff. Paulina and I went everywhere together; we walked the three blocks to day camp at the Y and if her dad asked her to go get milk at Convenience Corner, she ran down to my house and we crossed the street together. Paulina's

secret code word was *applesauce*, mine was *blueberry*. There was only one white van in town and it belonged to Mr. Johnson, whose son Sean was a life-guard. We stayed on the other side of the pool, just in case.

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The police found Penny's bike. A boy was seen riding it around town and when asked where he got it, he took them to a ditch. *It was just sitting there*, he told the newscaster, pointing. *I figured if it belonged to someone, they'd see it better if I was riding it around town, and if not, I had a new bike*. It didn't matter that it was a pink ten-speed with purple handlebars. A bike was a bike.

Paulina and I canvassed the neighborhood. We peeked in Mr. Johnson's trash cans, looking for the plaid clip-on hair bow Sarah was last seen wearing. Paulina found an Ace of Base tape, which she put in a sandwich bag. *Maybe she was listening to this when she was kidnapped*, she said. We covered it with baby powder and dusted it for fingerprints. Paulina came up with a plan to get Sean's fingerprints for comparison by asking him to help her fix her Walkman. We were going to the pool on Tuesday with our day camp. I just hoped Sarah or Penny would still be alive through the weekend.

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Paulina didn't go to day camp on Tuesday. She hadn't been able to play last night because her mother was in town. I was too shy to ask Sean to help me fix my own Walkman.

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A white van was involved in a three-car pileup outside of Lake George. The man driving it had an expired license and a scraggly beard. The news said the cops found traces of blood on the back seat. He was taken into custody, but released with a warning to stay put in case they needed to ask him more questions.

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I got a letter from Paulina on Friday. She said her mom took her on vacation and that I could borrow her Janet Jackson tapes while she was gone as long as I promised to give them back when she came home. She didn't say when that would be or where she was.

I went to collect the tapes, hoping she wouldn't mind if I took Cyndi Lauper and Bonnie Raitt too. Her dad answered the door and I showed him the letter as proof that I wasn't stealing. He let me take Cyndi and Bonnie too.

The police showed up at my house half an hour later. I showed them the letter and insisted that I would give the tapes back like she asked me to. They talked to my mom and took the white envelope the letter came in. Upstairs I practiced the dance steps Paulina and I made up to "She Bop."

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The New Haven police found Penny O'Dell naked, tangled in weeds along a creek bed twenty miles from her house. My mom covered my ears with cold hands, but I could still hear the newscaster's voice, *signs she*

*was sexually assaulted.* My mom, her eyes wet, thickly reiterated the lesson about not letting people touch me where my bathing suit covers.

*Not even my belly button?* I said. Paulina had an outie belly button and I hoped I wouldn't get in trouble for the one time she let me touch it. Mom shook her head and turned off the TV.

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Another letter from Paulina. She said she missed me, she missed her dad, she was sick of camping, she wanted to come home. Her mother had a new boyfriend with a Jafar mustache who called her "Sweet Peaches," which made her stomach feel hard. I wished I knew where she was so I could tell her the bad news about Penny. There was still hope that Sarah would be found alive, but I was helpless to find her without Paulina.

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Sarah's posters grew yellow and weathered, covered up by yard sales and church BBQs. They brought the white van man back to the police. DNA, my mom explained, is the stuff in your blood that tells doctors and scientists who you are, like a driver's license. The blood in his car matched Sarah's DNA. He wouldn't say where she was or if she was okay. Her parents pleaded on TV. I wrote those three letters down in my notebook and hoped Paulina was watching the news, wherever she was.

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My parents let me keep the next letter from Paulina, but took the envelope to the police. Paulina had heard about Penny and wished we could have done more. She bought me a present, a real detective kit from the bookstore and would mail it next time. She told me to tell her dad that she loved and she missed him; she was saving the money Jafar gave her for dancing for him so she could come visit him on an airplane. She said she already had fifty dollars. I wondered if he bought her a new Cyndi Lauper tape to dance to.

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They caught the man who killed Penny. He confessed, pled guilty, went to jail forever. Sarah was still out there, but I hadn't uncovered any clues since Paulina left and my detective kit never arrived. I didn't even know where to begin without her.

Paulina was on the news too. She was right about Jafar's bad mustache. The newscaster said her mother had committed *Custodial Interference*. Dad explained that meant her mom took her away from her dad without asking. I left him a note the next day saying that Mom and I went to the grocery store and I hoped that was okay.

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The white van man confessed to killing Sarah. He took the cops to the spot in the woods where he said he'd buried her, but they found nothing. The news showed him in his orange prison jumpsuit, laughing as he was led away from the hole. It wasn't supposed to end like this for Penny and Sarah. A heroic policeman

was supposed to knock the kidnapper to the floor and return them to their families. Death was for grandfathers and hamsters, the old and the sick. Death was not supposed to happen to little girls, buried somewhere in the woods, dark and alone.

That night he buried me in that hole, grinning madly while I spit dirt out of my mouth and felt it up in my shorts, saw his evil grinning face against the sky above me. I woke up sweating and screaming when I saw Paulina's bones beside me, still in the green tee-shirt she had on the last time I saw her. I spent the rest of the night patrolling the house, silent in my Hello Kitty slippers, making sure the windows were unbroken and the doors were locked. The door to the back porch didn't lock, so I propped a chair up under the doorknob.

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Sarah's posters came down. Paulina's picture went up in their place. It was useless, I thought. Everyone knows what Paulina looks like. I started saving my own allowance, five dollars a week, minus popsicle expenses, to get on an airplane and go find her myself. I wondered if I could borrow her Nancy Drew tee-shirt so that people would know I was a detective and give me clues as to her whereabouts.

One last letter came, this one shorter, with her California address in the top left, like Mrs. Youngs taught us when we wrote to our pen pals in New Jersey. She wondered if the men who killed Penny and Sarah did to them what Jafar did to her. She wondered if he was going to kill her too when he found out she'd disobeyed him by writing to me with their address and stealing a stamp from her mom's purse.

She told me to tell her dad she wanted to come home, that she'd pay him back for the airplane ride if he'd just come get her.

I took the letter to her dad. He took it to the police. Paulina was on the news two nights later; her mom and Jafar had been arrested. *Kidnapping. Custodial Interference. Child Endangerment...* my mom covered my ears again.

My dad drove her dad to the airport. He was gone for a week and when she came home, her hair was cut short and her clothes were too big on her skinny frame. I brought her tapes back and asked if she wanted to read the paper for a new case to solve. She said she didn't feel much like playing detective anymore.

# **ROBERT EARLE**

## **lost causes**

How many other women were already locked in the shipping container? Na Cheon did not know. Too dark. The distant screeching cranes and grinding truck engines were a dirge to her. All she wore was a silk robe and slippers. The customer gagged her, tied her hands and dragged her down the back stairs to a van. His eyes were hard discs as he bound her feet.

At last a woman could not remain quiet, a professor of economics who boasted about why she had been hunted down in Seoul.

“To shut me up because I say Pyongyang fails. Look at your sickly children, North Korea! How can they learn? Now look at us. We are being shipped in a peace offering of food. The Pyongyang cannibals want to eat us like rice!”

“No, they will not eat us!” a second voice cried.

“We are starved, too. What is there to eat?” a third voice asked.

Na Cheon had been in a camp. She knew that yes, they would be sacrificed so that the Pyongyang privileged and military could eat.

The professor said they must talk to keep their spirits up.

The second voice said she had been a solderer.

The professor said, “What did you solder?”

“Computer motherboards in Samsung plant, but soon I would lose my job to the robots coming across the factory. We watched them heading our way,

hanging from the ceiling like monkeys. Every day more.”

“Where did you live? Someone else ask this,” the professor instructed. “New one, you.”

“Where did you live?” Na Cheon asked.

The second voice said, “In a mop closet. I am so short I could fit.”

“But you escaped North Korea,” the professor said. “Short in size, not in strength! What is your name?”

“Hyori.”

The third voice came back into the conversation. She had been sent from North Korea to Macao; that’s where she escaped.

“What is your story?” the professor asked. “Tell us more.”

“I wash linens in a hotel, I hide in a laundry basket, I am pushed away, I smell the giant washing tub, I climb out, run...”

“What then?” the professor demanded.

The third voice spoke angrily. “What do you think? I prostitute to get here and work for Hyundai but North Koreans hunt down even little bug like me.”

To conceal her truth, Na Cheon asked, “What is it like being prostitute?”

“Yes, how many men each day?” the professor asked.

“You do not know,” the prostitute/Hyundai woman answered.

“How can you not know?”

“Too many.”

“Pleasure?”

“Whose pleasure?”

“I asked you a question. Do not ask me another question.”

“Then do not ask humiliating questions.”

“What if they make us all prostitutes?” Hyori the solderer asked. “They capture us because they need women for the soldiers.”

A fourth voice spoke: “It would be better than camp.”

Na Cheon, alarmed that this one also must know the camps, blurted, “I worked in a laundry, too.”

“Maybe you were where I smelled the washing tub,” the prostitute/Hyundai woman said.

“Not in Macao, here.” Na Cheon remembered how she envied the old women who collected the sheets in *The Awning of the Golden Dragon*, how peaceful they were, their kind looks as she waited for them to make the bed again—two sisters, hair gray, faces like walnuts, hands swollen but strong.

“Laundry must be done,” the professor said. “With justice every job is honor.”

The prostitute/Hyundai woman objected: “Not prostitution. What honor is this?”

“We will not be prostitutes,” the professor said. “A body for money, no. At least Devil Leader Kim knew that.” She described her South Korean students who did not believe what she taught them about the North. For instance, that there was starvation but no prostitution, no crime, no violence. Only the economy did not work. “They disagreed. They said nothing worked in the North so all the bad things happened, too. I said, ‘Students, you are wrong: There is electricity, heat, schools, music, all the things you have here except no fashion, no make-up, no wasted time. ‘Well,’ they said, ‘we don’t want unity anyway. How could we feed you?’ All these students want is peace, not the burden of their brothers and sisters in the North, sick, weak and stupid. That is not what the

South Korean government says, but what the people say. Send us back to the North! Goodbye! Go home!"

The professor sobbed, her certainty about everything becoming a weapon she used against herself.

The others asked themselves what they could do. They already had explored every inch of the container's floor for bits of rice. They sucked each grain to soften and enjoy it. A single grain of rice!

Other women cried, too, not just the professor. Why had they come to Seoul where there were North Korean agents hunting them on every corner? But where else could they have gone?

The professor hated the United States and said not there. The United States left Korea cut in half. It tried the same in Vietnam. Selfish fools! Worse than Japanese!

The prostitute/Hyundai woman who had passed through Macao revealed her name: Sri. All her life she wanted to go to America. She wanted to have a house. She wanted to have a baby in a hospital, not a shack. Who cared about Korea, whole or half? "How can we be better than Americans if we are nothing without them? When they go, we will kill ourselves, leave everyone dead."

There was hatch in the roof of the container. A jug of water was dropped in and burst. Everyone rushed over to lick the wet floor. Their heads bumped. They spread their fingers everywhere searching for drops and splashes of water.

The professor screamed at the roof, "Enemy! Enemy!"

The roof remained closed until, some time later, a woman was dropped through. They stroked and called to her, but she was dead.

"Broken neck," Sri said.

“We drag her to the other side,” the professor said.

Sri objected, “No! Leave her there. If they drop more water, it may not burst on her.”

The professor was offended. She said Sri had not told all the truth. Before she went to Macao, what did she do? She was educated. Educated people must help each other. Who was she? The truth!

Sri said she was a lab technician.

“What did you do wrong?”

“I spoiled a thousand eggs. To avoid the camps, I knew someone who would sell me to the hotel in Macao.”

“Sell you like a slave?”

“Yes, before I was a prostitute I was a slave, but before that I was a lab technician.”

“You must address me as professor, then. You know this. You have studied. You are not ignorant. Who else here is not ignorant? New one, tell us your name. Where do you come from? What is your life?”

Na Cheon gave her name and said she could read, write, and count. Once she could play the violin. She felt the other women wishing to hear more. The violin was a mark of great distinction. In an instant the professor would scold her, tell her to go on, not lie. She did not know what to say even if the truth sounded made up. As a young girl she liked to put her father’s hat on the floor—the hat of a general—pretending it was a castle where she was a princess. One day a more important general saw the hat on the floor and called it a disgrace. “I gave you that hat!” he yelled at her father. Her father shook with shame and rage. He begged forgiveness and promised punishment, sending Na Cheon and her mother into the camp he ran—from human to not-human, from general’s daughter to insect. She escaped with her

mother and one brother to China, but she reached Seoul by herself without them; that's where she learned English from American soldiers.

"Only learned English?" the professor asked.

Na Cheon realized her mistake, but she did not consider herself a prostitute when she was a girl with the Americans. "I learned sex, too. I told them I was the daughter of a general. They wanted to be with me."

The professor said Na Cheon's will and pride brought her ruin. "You are the daughter of a general, not a general yourself!"

Na Cheon said: "You asked about ignorance, not will and pride. If I can speak English, am I ignorant?"

"A hat is not a castle. Where is the truth in what you pretend?"

The fourth voice spoke directly to the professor in defense of Na Cheon. She said her name was Danbi. Danbi also had escaped from a camp. First into Manchuria, from there to Russia, and from there to South Korea, all with her father and a brother who protected her. "But here is what I must say: In the camp we were like now. We knew nothing. *This is ignorance.* When will they ship us away? Will we die here? Will someone save us? Professor, can you answer these questions? Why do you say some are ignorant and some are not?"

In the complete darkness every voice became an imaginary face, an imaginary expression, an imaginary posture. At least for Na Cheon. When she was a little girl, she could imagine a hat was a castle, and she could still imagine. Danbi had a reedy voice; with that voice went cords straining in her throat. The professor spoke firmly and must have been heavy once, if not now, and proud of her heaviness. What did Sri look like? Sri must have a broad, smooth forehead;

her torso and legs and arms must be long while Hyori had already said she was tiny. So in Na Cheon's mind, Hyori had the limbs of a bird.

Na Cheon wanted to know these women even better. She began speaking again, her imaginings and memories commingling, trying to draw the women closer to her in the infinite darkness. She said since she knew English a certain man said he could make her almost a real princess in Pakistan and have only one prince to please.

“You said yes?” Danbi asked.

Na Cheon said yes, and it was like that, with peacocks on the lawn and a stream near the little house where she lived for some time.

“You are making this up. You are speaking false things,” the professor said. “More castles in hats.”

“Excuse me, professor,” Hyori said, even if she was only a solderer, “we have told our names. What is yours?”

The professor said they must address her as professor.

Hyori said that they were not in a university.

Na Cheon pictured the professor's mouth tightly shut. She also was still wondering why Danbi and her family had been placed in a camp and was it the camp for which her father was general, but Hyori had asked the professor a question. Na Cheon wanted to hear the answer.

The professor relented. “My name is Boa.” But having said that, she went on as a way of regaining her stature: “So we are Danbi who was in a camp, Sri who was in Macao, Na Cheon the Make-Believe Girl, and Hyori the Solderer. Five women trapped in a shipping container to be sent back where we came from. Now go on, Make-Believe Girl. You were

courtesan to a Pakistani princeling surrounded by peacocks. Are you beautiful, too?"

Na Cheon disliked being chastised, but learning the names of the other women excited her. So she went on in her own way: The princeling had a son princeling and between them there was trouble about Na Cheon and another girl and they had to flee. From Punjab they went to Karachi where Na Cheon heard about a ship that could take her to South Korea and perhaps help her find her way to the church of Reverend Sung Wei who might bless her in marriage to a Japanese man because this was his belief: Japan and Korea must unite like man and woman in keeping with the Holy Spirit of the Lord.

Boa laughed. "What Lord?"

Danbi told her not to laugh.

Hyori said she had heard of the Reverend Sung Wei, founder not only of a church but a huge business chaebol. Sri asked about the ship, did Sung Wei own it, too?

Na Cheon did not know who owned the ship called *Chemise*. Its captain was called Musa the Chinaman. She was the youngest of the prostitutes on board, only nineteen. In turn she would have sex with Musa, the crew, and an American passenger. The other women did the same. The American told her he had been in Afghanistan for many years but was leaving Afghanistan for good. He said he was afraid the patron saint of lost causes had given up on Afghanistan and him both. Na Cheon asked him if he believed in saints. The American said not in saints, but lost causes, yes.

Sri asked if the American looked at Na Cheon when they had intercourse. Na Cheon said yes. Did Na Cheon look back? Na Cheon said yes. Sri told

everyone that prostitutes learned how to be blind with open eyes. She said for them the world was like rain on a windowpane. It did not get through. Hyori urged Na Cheon to continue. She had looked at this American and he said these things. What then?

“I felt I wanted to help him, but I didn’t know how.”

“Did he want to help you?” Bao asked.

“He talked to her when he had sex with her,” Sri said. “Always a sign.”

Na Cheon said, “Yes, maybe he wanted to help me. I think so.”

Danbi said, “In the camp the guards began fucking my behind when I was nine. I had another brother who tried to stop them. They cut off his dick and made me watch him die.”

Sri quickly asked, “Will there be more about this American?” It was as though Danbi had not spoken. Too painful, too awful, please, not that.

Na Cheon said, “Yes.” She caught her breath from wherever it had gone in sympathy with Danbi’s suffering so that she could go on.

Eventually the *Chemise* reached Inchon and she got off and it sailed on taking the American away and she went with the others to *The Awning of the Golden Dragon* in Oh, Pal, Pal in Seoul where a minister of Sung Wei’s church came every week and told them that he would decide who was fit for Sung Wei’s blessing, so they must be obedient and patient.

“Obedient to what?” Bao asked.

Na Cheon said obedient to all the Lord’s tests, He who created and challenged the world’s worth, even its sinners and whores.

“Did you believe this?” Bao asked.

“In North Korea I heard none of this. After I escaped, the American soldiers spoke about Jesus. In

Pakistan Allah. I asked myself if I ever believed anything existed that didn't exist. Sometimes, yes. It was all I believed—what I thought, not what I lived."

"What can exist that does not exist?" Hyori asked.

"Nothing," Bao said. "All is material in the struggles of time."

Sri asked, "May I speak?"

Bao granted permission. Sri said that in her education she had heard of spirits. They all had, hadn't they? This word 'saint' the American had used, they knew this word—성현—because some people believed in powers beyond time and space. Also the Jesus Na Cheon mentioned, the Allah. And she had heard of Reverend Sung Wei, too.

He came to South Korea from North Korea after the war. He saw God when the fighting stopped. God told him everlasting peace was his mission and it would come when Korea and Japan were in love.

Na Cheon spoke. "Yes, the minister of the Holy Spirit church said God told Sung Wei Jesus died too soon. Asia, not America, is the center of the world. We are here to bring it to heaven."

Bao said, "Heaven? A man who owns this *Awning of the Golden Dragon* speaks to God and knows heaven? A man who makes money selling women?"

Sri said Sung Wei could not know all the things he owned: factories, stores, buildings, banks... but everything went into his church and prayer center in Busan. "No more North Korea, he says. No more communism. Korea one."

"And you believe this, Sri?" Bao asked.

"I am telling you what I know is said. Sung Wei is powerful. Maybe he can rescue us. How can the North Koreans defy him and steal back Na Cheon for themselves?"

Bao said knowledge that was not rooted in truth was ignorance; ignorance repeated was lies; and lies were weak and feeble, not powerful. The North Koreans could destroy Sung Wei. Look at where the North Koreans had put them. In this container! What more proof did Sri need that heaven was nowhere and Sung Wei was nothing. Lies and words, words and lies.

Nonetheless something had stirred among the women and shaped the way they spoke to one another. It was as though they who could decide nothing outside themselves could at least decide things within themselves. Hyori urged Na Cheon to go on. What happened next?

Months passed in *The Awning of the Golden Dragon*. Na Cheon listened to the minister each week and asked him if he thought she might be chosen. He told her she must be obedient. She said she was. He told her she must be patient. She could not say she was patient. Then she must learn, the minister told her. Until she was patient, she could not be blessed.

“What was this man like? Tell us his looks,” Danbi said.

“A small man, little chin and big eyebrows. He wore a dark suit. Inside he took the pollution mask off his face. He did not have hands that had worked.”

“Was he fierce?”

“Yes, the guards and the madam feared him. He told them we were precious, could be saved for the mission of the Holy Spirit, and they must be perfect in caring for us.”

“Were you afraid of him, too?”

“Yes. Sometimes he would weep as he gave us sermons, the one about the clouds always made him weep for he was repeating Sung Wei’s own words.”

Then one day a woman—maybe an American

woman?—stood in front of the window where Na Cheon sat to attract customers. And the woman held up a picture of the American man who was a lost cause for Na Cheon to see. Na Cheon understood that he had come back to find her but American men were not allowed in Oh, Pal, Pal, so he sent this woman to tell her he was in Seoul.

The woman only stood there a few moments. Na Cheon watched her disappear into the thronging customers who came to Oh, Pal, Pal to look at the girls in the windows and make their choice.

What was Na Cheon to do? Should she follow? Not be obedient, not be patient?

“Yes, you should follow!” Danbi cried

Sri said yes, too, also Hyori, but not Bao, who said nothing.

“I followed,” Na Cheon said.

She was in her bedroom things. The woman did not look back. Na Cheon grew distressed. Everyone stared at her. A man grabbed her arm; she pulled away. Another man stepped in front of her. She slipped past him. There was the woman, deep in the crowd. Where was she going? She saw the woman go into a tea house across from Oh, Pal, Pal, and there in the window sat the American. Na Cheon lost courage. It was too much. She turned and ran back to *The Awning of the Golden Dragon*. Two days later she was abducted.

“By North Koreans from whorehouse criminals!” Bao exclaimed. “This American betrayed you. It is the only answer.”

“You do not know that!” Hyori said.

Bao insisted she did. “The North Korean agents spotted him and that’s how they saw you, the general’s daughter on their list. Because of the American,

they knew where you were.”

“But Sung Wei is too powerful to lose his brides,” Sri said. “The fierce minister will send his guards and get Na Cheon back and the rest of us, too.”

Hyori still wanted to know, “Why did this American come back for you?”

Na Cheon had thought about this. “Because I was lost cause, too.”

A plastic bottle hit the dead woman and indeed did not break. Danbi reached it first. She drank. Then Bao. Then Sri. Then Na Cheon. Finally little Hyori. No one could swallow too much at once. They held up each other’s heads to ease the water into mouth after mouth. Then they fell back, feeling the water creep slowly into their hunger, soft-pawed as a cat, cool and light and fleeting. Oh, for food. Oh, for food.

They knew day by the presence of sound—the distant creaking and banging, metal on metal, cable on pulley. They knew night by the absence of sound. They knew each other because night and day kept them together, never apart, sound or no sound, always together. Bao was much older, the others realized. Hyori was much weaker. Na Cheon was the youngest but not the strongest. The strongest was Danbi, then Sri. How did they know? They simply knew.

If they were anywhere, Sri said, they were in the port of Inchon. If they went anywhere, it would be by ship to North Korea.

“And North Korea is worse than this container,” Danbi said. “In the camps we will go into the bushes and have rabbit sex with guards for a few nuts, a piece of fruit. The vermin who killed my brother. No one can resist. We will be hit all the time.”

Bao said she would prefer to die. She was fifty-seven years old. There, she said it. Who would poke

between her legs? Who would have to hit her more than once to kill her? Why bother? Let her die. Sleep and die.

They didn't even have bodies anymore anyway, Hyori said. "We have voices. We have names. We have stories. Nothing more."

Na Cheon did not know whether she was asleep or awake, dreaming or hallucinating, but the others began to hear her say that she was in the hat, at last in the hat, the castle of the hat, the safety of the hat, no disgrace now because she was too small to be seen hidden in there. Invisible Na Cheon. Na Cheon the little girl again.

"Hush, hush," Sri comforted her. "Let me hold you."

Bao said yes, they all should draw together. "Always touch," she said.

This is what they did until there was a squeal and a clank. Then what? Shouts, cries, bullets piercing the container, these were bullets!

"Get down, lie flat!" Sri cried.

All the women began to weep. The fighting went on... the fighting stopped... the fighting went on again.

"The North Koreans will never yield!" Danbi moaned. "They are insane!"

But then what? Squealing and grinding and the doors at the end opened. No one could stand the light. Too much. They were too weak. They did not want to leave the container.

"Leave us alone!" Bao screamed.

The men who came dragged them out of the container past bodies crumpled on the ground and into a truck that drove them away.

"Are we free?" Hyori asked.

“Free?” Bao said. “Free? Free?”

They rocked and slid against each other, too weak to hold still.

Time passed. The truck slowed. The truck stopped. Its back door came up. There were these men again, pulling them out by their legs and arms and even hair.

They hauled the women into a kitchen, put two in chairs, three on the floor. Gray-haired walnut-faced crones ladled them bowls of noodle and onion soup.

“We are in *The Awning of the Golden Dragon*,” Na Cheon said.

The others stared at her long hair, gaunt crooked face and body. So this was Na Cheon. They looked at aging Bao. They looked at broad-shouldered Danbi. The hummingbird girl was little Hyori. Sri was a woman with breasts larger than her bottom. Everyone had too many teeth because their lips were so wasted away.

Then look! Beautiful women crowded the doorway, peering in at them. These women had mysterious beautiful eyes, mysterious beautiful hair, cigarettes in their hands.

“Na Cheon!” one beautiful woman cried. “Oh, Na Cheon!” But she did not dare come into the kitchen.

The minister appeared, just as Na Cheon had described him. His weak chin. His dark suit and fine hands. “Get up and follow me,” he said.

Hyori and Bao couldn’t get up. The walnut-faced crones helped them. The five women, plus the crones, plus the minister entered a parlor. He turned and faced them.

“The Lord’s Holy Spirit helped us find you and will keep you. The Lord’s Holy Spirit is stronger than North Korea, stronger than South Korea, stronger

than all forces on earth," he said. "In this battle the Lord will win. No one can steal a soul from this house."

Na Cheon bowed her head in shame, for she had been stolen from this house.

The minister pointed at Na Cheon. His finger was like a sword stabbing her. "Where is your obedience? Where is your patience? You walked into the street. You made yourself known. No, do not answer me. Tomorrow in Busan tell Sung Wei how many must die to bury the dead and cover their flesh with more flesh." He scanned the others as though they were fallen leaves, better swept away. "Go now. You are not summoned."

"We would only be kidnapped again or killed," Hyori said.

"Then live in this house for whores."

Bao said she would rather die. She looked at the others. "I will go to the university. I will tell them what happened. When the North Koreans find me again and kill me, my students will know why."

Danbi could not bear the thought of night after night of endless men.

She would leave, too.

The choice then came to Sri and Hyori.

"I was a whore on the streets of Macao," Sri said. "Why not here in this house in Seoul?"

"Slave to sin!" the minister hissed.

Hyori was so small. Who would have her? But the robot monkeys in the plant had taken her job. What was she to do?

"Stay," Sri urged her.

"Come with me," Danbi said.

Hyori reached out to Danbi. Danbi took her hand and pulled Hyori to her side.

“How will we live?” Hyori asked her.

Danbi said she did not know but would not let go of little Hyori’s hand.

# **RON MORITA**

## **restraint**

From the top of Moeser Lane, shingled roofs and stucco walls seem to slide down the hill to the Bay. The road drops like a roller coaster with two humps before the main building's green boomerang. Across a blue stripe of water lies the Golden Gate Bridge. Seen on my way to junior high school, the view feels like a postcard tacked on my wall. I bite my lips together because the ordinary people can see me. With my lips tight I can't say stupid, conceited things that I will think about for days, wishing they hadn't been said. Ashamed wishes.

I would like to take big steps and let my momentum carry me. That would be showing off. Even my little sister can walk fast down Moeser Lane. Once, a boy rode his bicycle all the way up in unraveled figure eights. I daydream that I am weaving, pumping, my lungs bursting. At the summit my mother waits, talking with painted-on feeling like the actress she wanted to be.

“You’re so strong! When you grow up, you’ll be in the Olympics!”

*He* stands behind her, brown eyes glaring beneath thick brows.

“Think you’re pretty good, don’t you? Anyone can do that with a little practice. Took you long enough, didn’t it?”

Anger wishes. Emotions digging at my insides become wishes that they go away. Wishes become

prayers—not to the ridiculous God that ordinary people worship, but to an indefinite someone who I visualize like the Sunday school pictures of Jesus.

The notebook grinds into my hip, but I must hold heavy books against my side. Carrying in front is for girls. Two boys wearing crew cuts and shirts with the tails out stride together. One gestures, making some joke. Across the street, two girls with black tube skirts and bubble hairdos take small steps. I would give anything to know what their voices say: to feel their presence and watch long hair undulate in the wind. I don't know any jokes and stay on my side.

Gym is my first class. I hate the stink of the locker room, the bang of metal doors, and the ugliness of hairy bodies. I hate the jeering, the bullies, and the way the guys look at me when I come up to bat. Descending concrete stairs to the asphalt field, I glimpse the girls in navy blue bloomers. They run awkwardly, hands swinging wide. I like this better than the punching stroke of the boys. On the portico I see Candace. Wearing lipstick and a hint of rouge, she has a crease in her chin. Breasts bulge into her snap-front blouse as she runs down the steps. When she reaches the field, I imagine an urgent liquid pushing, pulsing, not to be denied. A dark spot grows on the crotch of her gym suit, and her eyes get round. She runs to the locker room, leaving a trail of puddles. In English I daydream that she stands at the podium, glancing at note cards. Her face freezes, and I hear patterning. Liquid pools on the hardwood floor. Pushing fabric between her legs, she runs into the hall.

I eat my peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the glass-walled cafeteria, which juts from the kink in the boomerang. Across the table, short, narrow-faced Joey talks incessantly about Willie Mays. The din of a

hundred voices impressing each other is deafening, so I go outside. The reflection in the glass is a thin, slouching figure with plastered down hair parted on the left and old white Levis sagging at the hips. I do not like his narrow eyes and the thin, resentful line of his lips. I look away.

After school I sit in the empty second floor corridor. Across the hall is a door with a black and white plate that reads *Girls*. I imagine going inside. With my feet on the lid I hear footsteps, the clack of a door latch, and the sigh of clothing. There is a prolonged splash, and I visualize a yellow stream breaking a clear oval's mirror-like surface. Though I want to know who is there, my legs won't move. I press my hand against cold metal, trying to sense the softness of her hair. A whoosh startles me. I hear the click of heels, followed by a thump. Listening for sounds in the hall, I slip into the next stall and run my hand over warm, smooth plastic.

A clang interrupts my daydream. In a faded gray dress, a wrinkled black woman pulls a mop bucket up the hall. Her disapproving eyes bore into me as she pushes open the door. Fleeing, I resolve to come earlier next time. I return on other afternoons but the courage to enter escapes me. Weeks later I am looking down the hall, trying to avoid the woman's gaze, when she shouts, "Get out of here!" I never come back.

Saturday morning I walk to the flatlands, where people with old pickup trucks and hard voices live. U-Save Market has large windows and waist-high bins. Walking past one, I slip a panty in my jacket pocket. Its nylon feels smooth and cool. The elastic on the legs has little loops that look very feminine. On weekends, when the tension in my chest becomes too

great, I wear them. Their softness pulls me from the jostling competition that is male.

Three weeks later I return. Visible from the windows, I feel exposed. I walk back and forth a few times, but my hand refuses to move. Finally I put a package of panties inside my T-shirt. Near the cashiers, a man in a black sport coat points at me and says, "Open your shirt." I unbutton my outer sport shirt.

"See!" I walk out.

There are two. The inner crotch is soft white cotton, and I wonder how it feels to be a girl. Wearing all three, I pee over the toilet and press warm wetness against me. I hide them in the back of my drawer under a pile of underwear. My mother does the laundry and folds it neatly. A month later the panties are gone.

When she was four, my younger sister wet her bed and wore diapers. I saw her with cheesecloth bunched in thick folds at the crotch. Her old diapers are in the utility closet, used as rags. One night I fold two in a rectangle, soak them in warm water, and press the fabric against myself. At first I fear I am going to pee. Suddenly there is three seconds of ecstasy, after which I find a whitish liquid on the cloth.

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In high school I study five hours a night. My grades improve, but I cannot match the children of University professors from the Kensington hills. Sitting in math—an experimental program whose subtlety at times confounds me—I remember swimming lessons at the Y. All boys, we went naked in the indoor pool. I hated the row of cold showers we had to

run through, the red rash covering the back of a fat boy, and the smell of chlorine. I hated the instructor with thick hair on his chest, who threw me in the deep end when I wouldn't leave the side of the pool. My three sisters became lifeguards, but always I disliked the water.

Brad Decker is a burly boy with a crew cut and hair swept back on the sides. He is from the flatlands. I sense something racial in the derisive looks he gives me and the mean things he says. On the gym floor he throws a basketball as hard as he can at my chest. One afternoon he follows me home. Halfway up the hill he says, "Hey, want to fight?" I sense eagerness and walk away.

Every two weeks in History we receive Senior Scholastic magazine. It tells us that Communism is a conspiracy to enslave us and African military dictators who oppose it are paragons of virtue. Though the ordinary ones say what they are supposed to say, I sense lies in the pedantic sermonizing. I trace a map of Africa on a large sheet of transparent paper and tack it to my wall. *He* looks at it with undisguised contempt but says nothing.

It is Wednesday, extracurricular activities day, and I go to the Junior Statesmen meeting. Sitting alone in the back is Sheri Dryer, a thin sophomore with long auburn hair, a tan calf-length skirt, and teardrop glasses. I sit in front. The president has slick blonde hair parted near the top and a friendly expression. He stands at the podium, going over the old minutes, fund raising for the convention, and other boring things. Finally we debate a resolution on whether to outlaw pay television.

I stand at the podium, and the words come in a rush. "...Suppose the train companies got together

and outlawed paid air fares, because the air belongs to everyone..."

My side loses by one vote. After the meeting Sheri, who is the chapter secretary, writes in her notebook. She has hazel eyes and a half circle line under the mouth. As I watch, my heart pounds. The president sits next to her, and I catch the tenor warble of his voice. In the empty hall, I imagine sitting beside her, asking the topic for the next meeting. It is too late. Mistake wishes.

In my dream that night, Sheri and I lie back to back wearing diapers. Slender arms cover her breasts. I see only flowing hair and the whiteness of her skin. Turning, I pee into the leg of her diaper. She giggles. Suddenly I feel the bliss of being part of that delicate, angular body. The clock radio hums, and the pear tree casts a twisting shadow on my curtain. The sheet is sticky.

I am a junior and share no classes with sophomore Sheri—not even lunch. In my mind she sits next to me, staring at the blackboard through thick glasses. Candace is not in my college prep classes, but Sheri has a quiet intensity that says she is smart. At the next meeting, we debate whether to legalize abortion. I write my speech on scraps of paper during the boring time.

"...I read the entire Christian *Bible* and never saw a reference to when life begins. We each have within ourselves the power to create life. Will you now say to your girlfriend that it is murder not to sleep with you tonight?..."

My side wins by two votes.

After the meeting I sit next to Sheri, who continues to write in her notebook. "When's the convention?"

“What? Oh. May 23 in Palm Springs. I’ve never been there, but my brother has. You drive for two hours through the Mojave Desert. There are Joshua trees as far as you can see.”

“I hear they have more swimming pools than houses.”

“It’s a resort for the rich,” she says proudly.

“Like Junior Statesmen. Everyone in the chapter is from Kensington, except me. It’s a training ground for wealthy lawyers and politicians.”

“We live in Kensington, but we’re not rich. My father died when I was five, and my brother is still at the University. Both my parents are Ph.D.’s. Maybe that’s why I turned out so strange, ha, ha.” She laughs with her mouth open, like a boy.

The words emerge as if someone else speaks them. “When my father said he wanted to be a civil engineer, his friends laughed. Before the War they hired Japanese American engineers to sweep floors and count paper clips. In his freshman year he was the only student on campus during Christmas break, because he couldn’t afford the fare home. After he got out of the Evacuation Camps, one company in the city of Chicago would hire him to do real engineering. I’m sure Shaw, Metz & Dolio was aware of that and paid him accordingly. He learned engineering there, and now he wants to be the first Japanese American vice president of Bechtel Corporation.”

“I have to get this done.”

Something squeezes my chest. “Want to go to a movie on Saturday?”

“I can’t. Maybe next week.”

“Can I have your phone number?”

She tears a strip of paper from her notebook, writes, and returns to her minutes. The handwriting

is narrow and slanted. Her hips and arms move in swerves, as if to hide her femininity. In my dream that night, we are infants in diapers, playing pat-a-cake in the clouds. That Friday I call her.

A woman answers. "Yes."

"May I speak with Sheri Dryer?"

"Just a minute. Sheri!"

I wait, imagining her open-mouthed stare.

"Yes," says Sheri.

"This is Glen Hiroda. Would you like to see *John and Mary* next week, on Saturday?"

"Sure."

"Six-thirty?"

"OK."

"See you."

"See you."

Saturday I borrow the sky blue Galaxie, which *he* bought because the sloping hood provides better visibility. It is parked in the garage, lined up with two arrows on the wall. The space is narrow, for the garage is filled with old things: a workbench, a folding bed and a wooden drawer cabinet taller than I. My mother bustles about the kitchen with a hidden smile, as if someone told her the secrets of the universe. *He* and I are in the yard all day, installing reinforcing bars for the patio. *He* loves cement because it doesn't need mowing. At dinner *he* mentions the huge sums juries award to passengers in car accidents.

I steer the big car up one-lane Franciscan Way. Beyond a row of houses with short, descending driveways, the tops of eucalyptus in Sea View Cemetery remind me of clouds. Sheri's wood shingle house has a big cypress in front. When I ring the bell, a willowy woman with short brown hair answers the door.

"Sheri will be right out."

She is not right out, and I sit on a sculpted chair in a hall with an oval mirror at the end. Finally she comes, wearing a button-front blouse and a dark green skirt with creases under the roundness of her belly. She looks at me uncertainly, and I look away. As we walk up the stepping stones in front of the house, surrounded by vines and junipers, I feel myself rising in my pants.

She sits next to the door with a purse in her lap. I concentrate on the narrow road. When we reach divided Arlington Avenue, my heart is thumping. She looks out the window at hillside houses with picture windows facing the Bay. Conversation opens me to Mistake Wishes, while letting her watch the view is safe. I can almost feel her hip on the bench seat and am hard all the way to the theater.

I buy popcorn which Sheri munches ravenously. She stares at the screen with her head bent forward, the way she watches the podium at meetings. I go over things to say. The movie is about two lovers who grow to like one another, and I wonder whether she is offended by the ease with which they go to bed with each other. After it is over, I open the car door for her. Sliding in, she has a fleeting smile.

When the key turns and the car rumbles, I feel powerful. "My father talked about liability lawsuits at dinner. He was hinting not to have an accident."

"I can barely remember my father. He was tall, and he used to carry me on his shoulders. I visit him a lot."

"My father had a brother named Gary. He got things because he was the oldest, so my father had to show he was better. He never lets me win and criticizes anyone who does something better than he can. His voice gets tight when I show off."

“The cemetery is behind our house. He’s on a knoll overlooking the Bay. Whenever Mom is giving me a hard time I talk to him. Sometimes I take a lantern and go at night.”

“Has anyone ever bothered you?”

“Twice,” she says, smiling. “I used my lungs.”

Sheri’s mother invites me in for tea. I pass her brother, a handsome young man wearing a narrow blue tie. Sheri sits on the back of the floral print living room couch, giggling occasionally. Her mother sits on the end with her legs crossed, one foot pointed toward me.

“How do you find Junior Statesmen?”

“I like the resolutions. I’m not much of a debater, but when there’s an issue that I care about, words come to me.”

Her manner is ingratiating—almost seductive. She is a widow, and I wonder whether she likes me. On the way home I remember what I have said and analyze it word for word. There is nothing to cause ashamed wishes, but I warn myself not to become proud. Pride brings *his* anger, and anger brings hurting. When I walk in from the garage, *he* is waiting.

“Parked it pretty crooked, didn’t you?”

I want to reply, but words won’t come.

Friday I call Sheri. She is busy next Saturday. Also the next. After the following week’s Junior Statesmen meeting adjourns, I start toward her seat. When she doesn’t look up, I go into the hall. She is a brain, awkward and unsure of herself like me. She is also the prettiest girl who ever said two words to me.

I go in and sit next to her. “Pretty busy.”

“I have to get this done.”

“See you later.”

Two weeks later I call her. She is busy Saturday,

Friday and every other day I can think of for the next two months. Like the view of the Bay, she is un-touchable no matter how far I reach.

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At three in the morning I wake. I slip out the back door and climb to the orchard. From the hill, lights in San Francisco are visible beyond the black pool of the Bay. Deer rustle in the wild oats on the other side of the six-foot Transite fence that *he* and I built. I climb over. Soon my pants are wet with dew. Fifteen minutes later the asphalt of Franciscan Way glows under a lone streetlamp. I slip through a gap in chain link and slide down, stopping at a clump of bushes.

*Dear Lord, don't let this be poison oak.*

Crickets sing in the high grass, whose inch-long seeds cling to my pants. The air is damp and cold. I wander among tombstones flush with the ground but cannot find the row of houses. My pants are soaked to the skin. Orienting by the wind which blows from the Bay, I grope through clinging undergrowth, climb over the fence, and go home.

The next day I buy a topographical map and ride along the cemetery's curving lanes on my black three-speed bicycle. At three the next morning, with a compass and flashlight, I find a knoll with low tombstones. Two streetlights silhouette the houses, which lie in the shadow of a ridge. Sheri's is fifth from the left. I watch through my fold-up opera glasses, but nothing moves. Once or twice a week, when sleep escapes me, I visit the knoll.

"Do you go anywhere at night?" my mother asks weeks later with a rock hidden under the honeyed voice.

“Just to the yard. You can see San Francisco from the orchard.”

She has a knowing smile but says nothing. The following morning I wake in darkness and study serpentine lines from the pear tree’s shadow on my curtain. I dare not leave. Days later, at two in the morning, a hammer pounds my chest. It will not stop. I close the door quietly and climb to the orchard. Ahead, a towering black wave is about to break over me. I walk past street lamps silhouetting trees like halos. Cemetery trees are tentacled monsters outlined against the stars. Lying prone, I trace letters on a tombstone. There is a thud like a book dropping far away. A star moves from one of the houses. Hers. Floating in a circle of brightness, an apparition moves down the wall of night.

*Dear Lord, let this be the grave.*

Light touches my hand. I press my cheek against cold stone, imagining Franciscan Way lined with police cars. The shush of footsteps grows louder. I hold my breath.

“Daddy, it’s me again. God, she drives me crazy. Mom won’t let me see him. She says he’s too old for me. He’s only a grad student, and he knows *everything*. They treat me like a child. Cute, dumb Sheri. I got four A’s last semester, and even Eric couldn’t do that. I wish I were a boy. Eric gets to do whatever he wants. Everyone gets big-eyed when he opens his mouth, although most of what he says is either wrong or obvious.

She lowers her voice. “I wouldn’t tell you this if you weren’t dead. He touched me on the side of the neck, and I got this warm, tingly feeling in my stomach. He seemed to know I liked it, and he ran his fingers up my thigh. His hand moved in a little circle,

right here. I made these funny sounds like I couldn't breathe, only I could, and I wanted him to kiss me so badly, and then he did. I've never felt so wonderful. What's love, Daddy? Mom won't tell me anything. 'Don't let them touch you, or before you know it, you'll be pregnant.' How can I be pregnant when I'm on the Pill? It doesn't make sense. Nothing she says makes sense. You're the only rational parent I have. I miss you. Don't tell anyone. Other spirits, I mean. I'd die if Mom found out."

Shadows move on the grass. I hear a swish on the other side of a tombstone and edge my legs forward to run. The sound recedes. Maybe she has seen me and will call the police. I crawl to where she stood and touch soft wetness. My finger runs along the edges of cool petals. The lantern goes out. I put the flower in my handkerchief and cradle it in my hand. With tufts of fog flying overhead like phantom geese, I run toward the fence. I look over my shoulder for flashing red lights all the way home.

I put the rose in a glass of water behind the threadbare yellow stuffed dog in the back of my toy cabinet. All morning I daydream. I should have crawled closer while she talked. *Leaping suddenly, I swing my fist at her stomach.* Mistake wishes. Friday night I set my alarm for two-thirty. I stuff a coil of rope and triangles of cheesecloth sewn to make diapers into my knapsack. On the knoll I cover myself with wild oats. I will tie her up and make her wear diapers until she wets. Lying beneath crackling grass, I realize there is no place to hide her. The following night I leave the pack behind and go to my old spot, twenty feet from the grave. It will be enough to hear her voice and feel the love pouring onto the ground.

*Dear Lord, I will give all my wishes if she comes.*

I nod off in chemistry and forget to study for my math final. The glass and remains of the flower disappear. Remembering my super-heroine comic books with women in distress on the covers, which were gone when I returned from summer camp, I am annoyed that my mother gets into everything. I stop setting my alarm. With my ear on the pillow, I hear thumping I imagine is the footsteps of an old man climbing stairs in a stone tower. When the sound becomes painfully loud, my feet take me into the night. The wait is long. I see a light move away from the houses. It descends to a paved lane and is met by a man in a dark jacket. The snippets of Sheri's voice are so faint that they might be the wind. The two figures merge. They are far enough away that I cannot be certain they kiss.

I stay away for a few days and go more out of habit than hope. On the knoll I shiver in my navy blue windbreaker, feeling naked beneath the fog's pale glow. I fantasize fighting the graduate student. In one scenario I hit him on the head with a rock and then ask Sheri, who watches in horror, to run away with me. A lantern glows in the blackness below the houses. It moves up the hill. I press my face into the grass.

Sheri's voice tickles my insides. "This is our special place. I knew you'd be here. Mom says it's women's intuition, and I have it, ha, ha." The light grows brighter. "Come on, stop playing." My heart tries to pound its way out of my chest. I turn. "Oh, my God!"

Running footsteps fade into darkness. I flee and crouch behind the fence. No red lights come. On the tense walk home and through the years, I wait for the

police to arrive. I am an engineer now—biomedical, not like *him*. I designed my new house with a piano room in the basement. The walls are reinforced concrete, strong against Russian bombs and soundproof. On the mattress inside, beside the steel ring on the wall, lingers a woman's musty smell.

# **TANYA PERKINS**

## **imaginary beasts**

It was almost midnight when the stranger came in, a tall man, lean to the point of boniness, with hair as black as Winston's only cut short up the sides and at the back, not long and braided like Winston's but oily, with a rainbow sheen. They were of a height, though, and Winston, who was mopping the floor behind the counter because he was a beast for cleanliness, because cleanliness in a shop suggested cleanliness in the work, stopped and put up the mop. As the stranger stared at the flash lining the walls, Winston poured himself a little more lime soda, noticing for the first time that the ice cubes were almost melted away.

“You open for business?” the stranger asked. “Saw your light on.” The night was hot; he was sweating just enough for the plaid of his shirt to blur and cling across his breastbone.

“Sure,” said Winston, sipping the lime soda. “I stay open for two hours after the bars close down—”

“—Cause that's when you get easy cash business. See you like the wild kingdom.”

Though he could ink anything, Winston's specialty was imaginary beasts, anything multi-headed, double-winged, metamorphic. The walls of his shop were a menagerie of wild-eyed rocs, gryphons, bat-winged lions, tri-headed Rottweilers, orgiastically entwined snakes—jewel-eyed, gaping, resistant to mortality—swollen-assed women astride chimaeras

with tusks like jubilant phalluses. That was just at eye level; things got really wild higher up on the wall. Two months ago, the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce had paid Winston a visit and, after squinting upward at the topmost two tiers of imagery, asked him to place blinders over the offenders the way grocery stores hid *Maxim* and *Playboy*.

“It’s open to the public,” the Chairman said, rummaging for a hanky. He ran the hardware store on the next block and had successfully warded off the multi-headed Hydra of national big box chains, to the benefit of all the local merchants. Such single-handed defense of smaller kingdoms, Winston readily acknowledged, was to be admired.

Still, Winston replied, “What’s next? A T-shirt on Botticelli’s *Venus*? ”

“That’s not my concern,” the Chairman said. “We’re a family-oriented neighborhood. Your designs lend an atmosphere of, well, adult, um, enchantments.”

“It’s all in the mind,” Winston said.

Winston had recounted the exchange to Sadie that night. He exaggerated a little, enlarging his own courageous retort, making the Chairman seem a buffoon. That was part of his artistry, too—embroidery of skin, embroidery of events, the way he could fill in blank spots with significance.

“You should have popped him one,” Sadie said. “Right in the jaw. But then that’s not your style anymore.”

Referring, naturally, to the 12-step program he’d started, when booze and coke had taken him to a particular brink and he’d looked down, down, down into the abyss of what might be his soul and decided to step back from that crumbling edge. But how could he know that each step was made in seven-league

boots that took him soaring past old companions and even older habits, smoky tastes that furred his tongue and parts of himself he learned to shun? Going clean was a cleaving experience, separating himself from himself, leaving him splintered, yet with a sense of wholeness that his prior dependencies never supplied.

It was around that time that Sadie walked out and depression wrapped its long arms around him. He didn't come into the shop for two weeks; Chris, his assistant, took over, brought him cold burgers in the evenings until the McDonald's and Burger King bags piled up in front of his door and raccoons had torn through them. He came out one morning, planning on driving his old red Corolla into a tree trunk somewhere at seventy miles an hour because even literal sulphur and brimstone was preferable to the brand of hell he was in, and found soggy paper and half-chewed wrappers shredded all over the lawn.

Oddly, it was the litter that jarred him out of the darkness. The bits of white and yellow paper were so bright! So unexpectedly alive in the breeze! Like small cheerful aliens come to Earth for an intermission, a reprieve from the intensity of intergalactic life. Winston turned around and went back in and took a shower. When he emerged, flushed and dripping, Sadie was back, just like that, standing in the living room, still in her white down jacket, blinking at him in the sunlight streaming through the open door, framed in light, painfully beautiful. Just as beautiful as when, a month later, she stood in the doorway of their bedroom, the pregnancy test in her hand, outstretched like a plastic wand, extended outwards to Winston as proof that some kind of happily-ever-after might still be within reach.

He took comfort in reading the Book of Hosea, the Old Testament prophet who was commanded by God to take back his philandering wife: *Thou shalt not play the harlot, and thou shalt not be for another man: so will I also be for thee.* He'd imagined himself saying those words in an impressive baritone, the sound rolling like cedar logs down an embankment and Sadie, quaking and remorseful. In the end he decided against it, not just because he couldn't pull off much more than a faltering tenor at the best of times but because she'd shake her head at his religiosity, not quaking but annoyed.

Now he swallowed the rest of the lime soda and said to the stranger, "See anything you like? Or do you have something in mind already?"

"Oh, I've got something in mind. Nothing fancy, just a name."

"Let me get out my fonts." He pulled out a heavy black binder from under the counter and opened it. Winston kept a catalogue of a hundred fonts, of which better than eighty he could do without even looking.

"So you work till four a.m.?" the stranger said, scrutinizing the font book.

"My assistant's usually here for the night shift but he had to go out of town."

"That your girlfriend?" The stranger nodded toward the framed print of Sadie that Winston kept by the cash register.

"Wife. Just found out I'm going to be a dad, too. First time." It was still a shock, thinking about it, saying it out loud. Especially in the middle of the night, to some stranger that had wandered in from nowhere. Winston wasn't one to divulge intimacies.

"You ready for this?" Sadie had said, like a figure in a vision, as if the white plastic stick with its blue

cross was what would have to be cared for and nurtured and never set down.

“Of course we are!” he said. “It’s what we’ve wanted, isn’t it? Haven’t we always wanted this?” And put his arms around her and kissed her while she let him, still holding the white plastic stick, and then, when he was through, she’d gone into the kitchen and lit a cigarette.

“Is that a good idea?” he asked, following her. At which she laughed. Later she went out. He watched TV until midnight when she came back and sat beside him on the couch, smelling of smoke and other, duller smells and, later, they’d made love right there, in the living room, on the floor next to the glass and chrome coffee table he’d found in the alley. The whole time, the words kept rolling around in his head—*so will I also be for thee*—and the rocking of their bodies was like balm of Gilead that soothed his wounds and coaxed the scar tissue along.

The stranger leaned toward the picture, studying it closely. “Looks a little like a woman I know. Hair was different, darker.”

Winston said nothing, just got out the release forms and then poured more lime soda into his glass, from which the ice cubes were now fully gone.

“You ever had your heart broke?” the stranger asked. “You got any more of that soda? How about something to go into it?”

Winston poured the remains of the lime soda into a plastic cup and gave it to the stranger. “You’ll have to go next door for anything stronger. I don’t do that stuff anymore. Got a font you like?”

“You pick,” the stranger said. “Something simple. I don’t care.” Up close, he was older than he’d first seemed, his skin faintly herringboned with ancient

acne scars, darker lines bracketing his mouth and radiating out from under his eyes, oddly flecked with amber and light green, with irises more oval than rounded. There was a rich, humus odor about him.

“How about this one?” Winston flipped to a page of scripted fonts. San serifs were easier and faster but on the living texture of skin, script just looked better. Like it belonged, like it might have grown out of the epidermis naturally.

“Sure,” said the stranger. “Let’s do it.” He watched as Winston wrote the font name on the release form.

“So what’s the name you want?”

“Sadie. S-A-D-E-E. Right in the small of my back.”

A tremor passed through Winston, as if a tea-spoon of poison administered some time earlier was only now taking effect. He looked at the stranger, at his slick black hair and the way his plaid shirt clung to him. The sweat-dampened patch had grown, stretching out from his breastbone toward his shoulders, darkening the front of his shirt. A car roared by outside, its muffler failing. “That’s my wife’s name, Sadie. Only she spells it I-E. Where’d you say you met this woman?”

“I didn’t,” said the stranger, grinning.

“Not a name you hear much.” There was something else he should ask the stranger, push him for more information but he found himself studying the form instead, where he had penciled the name in, all in capitals. “You sure it’s two Es?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Just like that.”

After the stranger signed the forms, Winston led him around the counter and had him lie face down on a padded table. He rolled up his shirt a few inches

and then positioned a mirror so that the man could see his own back.

“About here?” Winston asked and the stranger nodded. Pulling on latex gloves, Winston quickly washed and shaved the area, then got out the ink caps—the man wanted dark blue and gold—and autoclave pouch. Plenty of other tattoo artists used stencils or drew freehand before inking but, in Winston’s opinion, that was the mark of a technician rather than an artist. And he was a true artist, true in originality, in boldness, in technique and in creativity, even in the matter of a simple name.

Remembering now the stranger’s earlier question, Winston said, “You asked if I’ve ever had my heart broke. Well, I came close.” He liked to make conversation, shoot the breeze on whatever the customer wanted. It made them relax.

“Close ain’t the same.”

Winston readied the tattoo machine, his foot pumping the pedal. “I’m starting,” he said. “The first few lines hurt the worst.”

“I know,” said the stranger. “This ain’t my first. Anyway, she robbed me blind.”

“So what’d she take, your wallet?”

“Yes, to say the truth. And my heart.” The man’s skin on the small of his back was fine, poreless, like a child’s, and he lay perfectly still under Winston’s hand, as if holding his breath, as if even his pulse was in abeyance. “Sounds corny, doesn’t it? I know it does. But she took that thing that pumps my blood and keeps me alive.”

“You seem pretty alive to me,” Winston said.

He laughed and Winston had to say, “Stay still now.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” the man said.

“Well, you’ll get over her. Learn to forgive and forget. Move on to someone else. Plenty of chicks around.”

“No, no! You don’t understand what I’m getting at.” In his excitement, the stranger began to perspire even more profusely, so that Winston had to stop repeatedly to wipe away the stranger’s blood and sweat. He’d bought a fan for the shop a month ago, when summer had unrolled its first thick layer over the town, but it broke and Chris had been promising to fix it yet here it was, three weeks later and a second stifling layer of summer laid crosswise over the first so that now it was hardly possible to walk across the room without feeling like you were swimming through broth.

“You see, she tricked me into getting her pregnant. Stole my seed, if you know what I mean. My posterity, my lineage. Then she took off, still twitching her little ass at me.”

The conversation was getting too personal for Winston so he said nothing and bent his head further, focusing his attention more tightly on the man’s back, on the four inches of fine skin between the stranger’s belt and the cotton plaid shirt that he’d rolled up. The S was done, and the A and now he eased the point of the machine (he never called it a gun) in a clean curve of dark blue to form the lower barrel of the D, pausing to daub at the stranger’s blood that sprouted in crimson dots.

“Well, I learned to forgive people when they do me wrong,” he said after a few minutes. “You should try it. Good for your health. Makes you calm and peaceful inside, like nothing can ever rile you up again. Like a, a—butterfly. Sounds corny, but it’s true.” He realized he was echoing what the stranger

said moments earlier. Winston was struggling to concentrate now, aware of the stranger's serpentine back, his closeness, the odd intimacy that injecting ink under another's skin inevitably aroused. The longer Winston worked on the stranger, the stronger his imagination grew, the sense that he wasn't working on a customer but on a new, fantastic page of flash, a hybrid of ink and flesh that had been waiting, fully formed, in the recesses of his mind where the lines curled and colors softened. It was the same fantasy held by all artists, in every medium, that their work will reach such perfection that it will transcend its form and take on a nobility of its own. It happened every time he inked someone and yet, in the broiling heat of this particular night, the intensity was such he'd never before experienced.

Winston took his foot off the pedal and sat back. The first three letters of the name were done perfectly, in his unfailing sweeping style. Still, he wanted to be done with it as fast as he could, and close the shop early. He didn't care. He wanted to kneel on the floor beside his bed where Sadie slept and pray for rain to break the clenched heat that had been accumulating for so long.

Instead, Winston said, "I'm not one to talk about my own problems much, but let me give you some advice. It wasn't until I got clean and sober that I learned that things work out for the best, even if we don't see it at the time. I guess you could say I believe in a kind of cosmic balancing act." He went to the sink and filled his glass with cold water. He turned back to the stranger and handed him a mirror.

"Take a look and tell me what you think." He hefted a larger mirror and held it to the stranger's reclining back. "Okay so far?"

“Good enough.”

“So if this Sadee broke your heart and stole your seed, why do you want her name inked on your back? Not that it’s any of my business.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” the stranger said.

“Try me.” Winston settled back onto his stool.

“Let’s just say I like to keep track of settled accounts.”

“So you’re a good bookkeeper. You should see my accounts. Balanced to the penny, every bill paid on time. I’ve got credit that other merchants would kill for.”

The man laughed. “You say you forgive? Well, I like to see justice served. I’m a goddamn walking record of justice and I’m telling you because you’re a man who’s been hurt himself by such a woman. I knew it the moment I came in. You and me, we’re a lot alike.”

“Me? I’m just a tattoo artist doing you a service.”

But the stranger went on, as if he hadn’t heard Winston. “See, a woman like that is poison. Pure, walking poison. Or like an airborne plague. You know that if it spreads, it’ll keep doing damage. You don’t want it to spread or reproduce.”

“Leave it in the hands of the man upstairs,” Winston said, steadying the machine in his hand, which was slippery with sweat. He was working swifter now, a little tremor passing through him from moment to moment and he focused on the precision of his letters, the careful scrollwork that was his trademark.

“And how does the man upstairs do that? You tell me that.”

“He—uses different means. Depends.”

“God uses man to do His work. You said you believe things balance out. Well, I like to think of myself as a balancer.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Winston repeated. “Now don’t move, this is the tricky part.” The stranger lay still as a rock as Winston started in on the gold detail.

After a few minutes, the stranger said, “I’m going to kill her.”

An impulse to laugh rose in Winston’s throat. He took a sip of water and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before speaking. “And how do you plan on doing that—you got a gun?”

“Only a fool would use a gun. Too noisy, too easy to trace. No, there’re better ways, ways that no man can trace.”

“You ain’t afraid of prison?”

The stranger didn’t reply. Winston went to the radio and turned it on. He fiddled with the dial, tuning it to the local station. They were both silent as the weather report came on. Winston thought about his wife at home in their bed, hair splayed out across the pink satin pillow she liked to sleep on. When she’d been gone, he’d slept on that pillow, breathing in the lingering whiffs of the expensive conditioner she used every morning until finally it faded and he was left with a dull sourness.

Finally, he asked the stranger, “How do you know you’ll get away with it?”

“I already have. Twice. Roll up my shirt.”

Winston slowly lifted the lightweight plaid fabric, revealing the upper portion of the stranger’s back. On his right shoulder blade, in deep vermillion, was the name *Wendy*. On the left, in green, *Lisa*, in perfectly balanced scrollwork, as ornate and flawless as Winston’s own hand.

He dropped the shirt and stepped back. Attracted by the light, a luna moth was dodging and swooping softly against the ceiling, its wings as broad as his

hand, shushing in a rhythm of confusion and desire, mistaking the ceiling light for the moon, for a navigational tool that would lead it to food and love. Winston grabbed a broom and smashed the moth against the floor until it was scattered dust. Then he re-washed his hands and pulled on a fresh pair of latex gloves.

When he found his voice once more, he said, "I don't believe you."

"I was just fooling with you anyway," the stranger said. "I do that sometimes."

Winston turned his attention back to his work and swiftly completed the final letter. The radio said that the roiling heat would break sometime that night as a colder front moved in, bringing with it a downpour, thunderstorm, and lightning. Soon, he hoped.

It was as he was wiping the blood and excess ink from the stranger's skin that Winston realized he'd made a terrible mistake, the first in his professional life. Across the stranger's lower back, in voluptuous blue and gold script indistinguishable from the other two names, he'd inked the name S-A-D-I-E. A tremor ran through him.

"You about done?" the stranger asked. "Because I've got things to take care of before the storm starts."

"Listen," said Winston. "I—I made a mistake—"

"You did?" said the stranger, standing up and stretching. "You don't seem the type." He got out his wallet and withdrew some bills and set them on the counter.

"No, let me tell you. You wanted it spelled—"

"I'm sure it's fine," the stranger said. "In fact, I know it is." He was close enough that Winston could see the shattered pores, the even troughs running from nose to mouth, and how the black hairs sprang

back from his pale hairline to form a deep widow's peak. They were eye to eye, of perfect and even height so that as Winston inhaled, it was the stranger's own molten air he drew into his lungs, the stranger's thick humus he smelled rising from his own damp body, even after the man left.

Later, after he'd cleaned up and phoned his wife to say he would be home soon, Winston stood in the door of his shop. He watched the heavenly burst fill the street with silver water and saw the sky explode with light and felt the eyes of the imaginary beasts on the walls of his shop, watching him just like they watched the stranger, with the interest of one of their own.

# **JEREMY SCHNEE**

## **strongman**

When Clay Center, a town that surrounded a giant hole in the ground, began to collapse, Teddy Wills knew that the man he once thought of as the strongest in the world was going to try and save it. The problem with this, Ron Wills, or Iron Ron as the rest of town had taken to calling him again, was no hero. As a child Teddy saw his father perform amazing feats: crushing bricks in his bare hands, juggling boulders blindfolded, lifting full bookcases, or bending barbells. But that was years ago. That was before the news scandal, before the move, and most importantly, before Ron left his infamous strongman show behind.

Teddy was almost nineteen and had lived in Clay Center for eight years. Among empty fields and flat skylines, town was a bunch of houses and buildings circling the limestone quarry. When it rained water drained toward the hole. In recent years, its edges had expanded so far that fences and trees were swallowed. Dust in the air above town made it impossible to even see stars at night. In such a desolate place, perhaps people needed to believe in something like his father.

After they first moved here, Ron worked in the quarry, raised Teddy, and never mentioned his past. He was accepted as normal. Then a few years back unexplainable things began to happen, first in the dark quarry, then spreading out to town. One night

old Miss Randall's smashed car was pulled from a ditch and carried to her home. On another, the Kippen's crumbling house got hoisted up with boulders to last the poor family longer. Old signs, light posts, even playground equipment was bent back into place. Someone was looking out for Clay Center, and this became especially apparent when lives were at stake.

There was the time Dr. Johnson—on account of her running around on him—had his wife held up with a shotgun. Town's three-man police force wasn't equipped for hostage situations and it looked like it might end badly. Then easy as peeling skin from an orange, someone ripped a wall from the house and left the doc unconscious for the police. Last year, the fire department and half of town tried to keep a block-wide inferno from spreading. No one noticed an oak tree burning nearby. When it collapsed, people said it looked like a train falling from the sky. They thought they'd be crushed, but invisible in the smoke, someone caught the tree and tossed it aside.

Although nothing heroic had happened for almost a year, to Teddy's disappointment Clay Center hadn't forgotten these extraordinary events.

Teddy was mopping the halls of the school when he thought he heard thunder—there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The town became a snow globe. Buildings trembled, trees shook leaves from branches, water sloshed from his bucket. When the ground steadied, a spire of black rose from the quarry like a serpent. Without hesitation, he left school and ran across town.

He hadn't talked to his dad in almost a year. Teddy lived on the other side of Clay Center, the quarry a big enough space to get out of Iron Ron's shadow. He wasn't sure what he'd say, just knew he had to stop his father from going down there. Even if

everyone else saw Ron as a hero, Teddy knew he was an overweight, arthritic, and worn-down man. But even Teddy had to admit, he once looked at his father quite differently.

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Years ago, just before he started school, Teddy's parents decided he should spend a summer with his dad. With a heavy traveling schedule, Ron only spent a few scattered weeks at the house. Teddy was somewhat afraid of the man who during holidays came home and had to twist through doorframes, whose voice echoed when he spoke. Still, he said goodbye to his mother and boarded his dad's bus.

"I can't wait to show you what I do." His dad sat next to him slow and careful, like everything he did around Teddy.

"You're really strong or something?" The explanation his parents gave for his dad's job seemed a bit odd. What was so special about lifting stuff?

"You'll see," his father winked. "Just wait."

After a long day and night of driving, they arrived at a big empty field where a semi-trailer waited. Teddy watched men set up a stage, watched cars park, a box fill with money, and a crowd gather. He still didn't get the big deal. Then he saw his dad go in the bus wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants, and come out in a shining blue and red costume.

"Whoa!" The costume hugged his dad's muscle, had boots up to the knees and a big dumbbell across the chest that glowed like a mirror in the sunlight. "Is that you, Dad?"

Iron Ron, as the crowd chanted, carried Teddy to the front row.

“Things are about to get exciting,” he said.

The crowd began to cheer. The explanation for his dad’s job wasn’t just confusing, but was approached even by a five-year-old with skepticism. However, when a long green station wagon drove on stage, Iron Ron rubbed his hands as though he actually planned to lift it.

Drums beat; the crowd hushed. His father bent down and gripped the bumper; Teddy stopped breathing. He stood on his chair, gripped the edge of the stage. With one hand, Iron Ron grabbed the front of the car. Then his dad kneeled, pulling the car up like a teeter-totter. Teddy heard a grunt, his dad stood—actually stood, the giant car resting on his shoulders—then pushing with those piston arms, he lifted the whole thing above him.

Impossible!

For a moment the world stopped. The roaring crowd halted, became like a painting. Heavy as cement, Teddy couldn’t move. The breeze that’d been blowing lingered like the edge of a feather on his face. In the coming hour, he would watch the rest of the show, feel the sting of debris when his father punched rock, hear metal creak like a bird call when Iron Ron bent a crowbar, and smell sweat dripping from other men’s shirts when they tried to wrestle his father. But right then, there was only silence, stillness, and his dad on stage, strong as a stone pillar and holding a car. Once the world hiccupped back into place, Teddy knew nothing would ever look the same again.

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Dust from the cave-in flooded the sky above Clay Center. At mid-afternoon the sun disappeared.

Streetlights came on and the few cars out drove slowly, careful not to slip on the dust snowing to the streets. The crisp air of spring grew colder and the only sounds were emergency vehicles driving out of the quarry, where sirens echoed off rock walls like inside a gigantic bell.

In houses Teddy passed, he saw lights on and families huddled inside. Most of the men in town, and a few women, worked in the quarry. Some were pulling into driveways, but knowing what it was like down there, Teddy doubted everyone was okay. As he neared his father's house he heard voices, and through the dust-fog saw people: wives, children, evacuated quarry workers—covered head to toe in dirt—all standing on his father's front lawn. Even Sheriff Tippen, who eyed Teddy as he slid in to the back of the crowd, was there.

Ron Wills stood on his old crumbling porch. Among cries for help, Teddy managed to hear what happened. Big as a house, a chunk of rock had collapsed from the north wall and shattered on the quarry floor. Everyone fled, but the rubble and avalanches trapped some workers who ran for safety under a steel rock crusher. Beneath a boulder too big to move, with the quarry unstable and heavy equipment buried, there was no way to get them out.

“You’re our only hope,” someone shouted.

Ron was still a big man even in his fifties. His muscular arms offset the gut stretching his T-shirt. As he paced the porch, listening to details of the situation, boards sank under his steps.

“I’ll go,” Iron Ron shouted. “I’ll go down and do what I can.”

The crowd cheered. People thanked his father, reached up to shake his hand. The sheriff pulled his

car around to drive Ron into the quarry.

Teddy inhaled, inflated his chest big as a balloon.

“Don’t go down there!” His voice boomed. “Don’t be a fool!”

He wasn’t usually someone who could hush a crowd. He hadn’t inherited his father’s size. Teddy was thin, ribs visible when he removed his shirt and ropes of his tough arms barely filled his sleeves. He stood a few inches shorter than most men, didn’t even reach his father’s shoulder. Most people wouldn’t guess he was Ron’s son. One thing Teddy inherited though were big hands, hands his dad always said were good for working, and he used these to part the crowd. He walked up onto the porch, a cornstalk in front of a redwood.

“Teddy,” Ron smiled. “Teddy, I’ve missed you.”

“Admit it, you were a fake.”

“Get out of your dad’s way,” Sheriff Tippen said.

Teddy had always been a bit of an outcast in Clay Center. Even the sheriff didn’t seem to like him. He’d never caught Teddy doing anything, but ran into him a few times at night and assumed he was up to no good. For the past year, Teddy cleaned his old school, lived in a two-room apartment, and talked to no one. For the past year, he had faded away.

“You’re making a mistake,” Teddy said, addressing his father, the sheriff, the whole crowd.

“My husband is down there,” Alice Baker, who used to live across the road, said.

“My son,” Teddy’s old kindergarten teacher, Mrs. McCulloch, said.

“There’s no time for this, Teddy,” said Ray Caster, a man who’d once been a classmate, now a rookie in the quarry. Teddy turned on the porch and saw all their faces. The workers looked tired and defeated.

The parents, wives, and children looked terrified. Teddy stepped aside.

“I’ve gotta try,” Ron said and walked through the crowd. “I have to try to help.” The police car bounced as his dad got in.

“It wasn’t real,” Teddy said. But this time when he spoke, the cheering of the crowd and blare of the sheriff’s siren drowned him out. Teddy knew what he had to do now. Despite the evacuation and danger of another cave-in, he had to follow his father into the quarry.

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Teddy was ten years old when his family moved to this small out-of-the-way place where Iron Ron, or Ron as he started to go by, could start over. This was after the news scandal, after the strongman show shut down, and after people began to call his dad a big fake.

Even in Clay Center the rumor cast a shadow. In the neighborhood and at school, Teddy got into arguments and had trouble making friends. Kids asked if his dad was so strong, why when they passed the house and saw him changing oil, didn’t he just lift the car to get under it. Or when they saw him tearing a rusty fence out of the yard, why did he use a shovel and not his bare hands. Teddy had done research, knew about adrenaline, impulses in muscle, feats of extraordinary human acts. Yet more than anything he needed proof. When Ron got a job in the quarry, he knew everything would change.

On his dad’s first day, he convinced him to wear a bright orange sweatshirt. Then at school, Teddy put the word out. To anyone who didn’t believe Iron Ron

was the strongest around, he'd show them otherwise. When school ended, thirty kids waited. Sure they all heard stories about the infamous show and how Ron was a phony; however, a lot of them wondered not about Ron but Teddy. He seemed to know something no one else did.

The few weeks of summer Teddy used to spend traveling with his dad were his favorite of the year. With or without a show, Teddy understood his father had the same strength. What he didn't understand was the scandal. Apparently a reporter had been investigating Iron Ron. Not for the first time. The show always moved, avoided cities, especially cameras. Small and secret, this was part of the draw. Then a reporter wrote a story about the use of giant magnets under the stage. He didn't have pictures, just a secret source. People began to heckle Iron Ron. More reporters got involved and everyone demanded his dad admit how he pulled off all of the "tricks."

Teddy led the other kids to a hole in the perimeter fence of the quarry. They crawled through, crept on their bellies to the edge. Machinery and equipment looked like toys below.

"Just you wait," Teddy said. "See, he's in the orange." A few children—those who'd never seen him yet—whispered about how big Ron looked even from there.

"And he can lift stuff twice his size," Teddy said.

Never once did he ask his father about the scandal. Although he found the reporter's claims strange, even stranger was his dad's reaction. Ron was happy. No more traveling, he'd get to see Teddy and his mom all the time.

"He's going for the big pile of rocks," one kid said. The others gasped, tensed, and Teddy expected his

father to scoop the whole pile up. When he stood, Ron held a stone no bigger than a baby. Kids laughed. Teddy told them to wait, just wait. His father stopped to catch his breath and wipe his forehead. The kids began to leave.

Before moving to Clay Center, one day his dad gathered everything in the house involving Iron Ron: the uniform, souvenirs, even posters off Teddy's wall. He gathered it all on the living room floor and threw it in the trash.

Soon the only one left at the quarry edge, Teddy watched for hours. Ron just did the same stuff as other men. His father didn't stand out; looked so normal. And that's when it made sense. The news story had seemed suspicious, not to mention his dad's reaction. Maybe everyone else was fooled, but Iron Ron wasn't the fake. The news story was. Maybe his dad even set it up, wanted out of the spotlight.

On his walk home Teddy found a metal pipe in an alley. Thick as his waist, taller than him and solid steel, he had an idea. He struggled just to lift it, but dragged it all the way home and hid it under the kitchen table before his mother saw. At dinner that night he told his dad he had a surprise.

"I got this for you," Teddy said, crawling under the table. "So you can bend it."

"I'm tired, bud," Ron said. He set the pipe back under the table.

"Oh Iron Ron," his mom laughed. "Show us how strong you are." His parents had been fighting a lot lately. Since they'd moved she seemed unhappy.

"He can't bend it," she said.

"Yes, he really can." Teddy thought his mom was just adjusting to Clay Center. She'd been angry since they moved, since they had much less money. This

was the first time they were a family for more than a few weeks a year and something was missing for them.

“Will you please bend it?” Teddy asked again.

“Maybe later,” Ron said. The pipe would sit. Teddy would wait, hoping his dad would bend it, break it, anything. In another month or so, it’d get tossed into the yard next to the garage. Teddy never imagined the pipe would be around longer than his mother. In a few weeks she’d leave. Teddy wouldn’t go with her when she asked. He wanted to stay with his dad. Even if no one else believed what he knew, it didn’t matter. Someday, everyone would learn the truth.

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The police car drove off, lights and siren disappearing in the dust. The crowd on his father’s lawn turned to Teddy. He stood on the porch and met their eyes. Some scowled, some shook their heads.

“What kinda son are you?” someone shouted.

“Do you even care about those men?”

Teddy stood blank and motionless at the step of the porch. Indeed, he did not have much going in Clay Center. After graduating high school he tried to leave. Night of the ceremony actually, he packed his stuff, loaded the car, and before sunrise, before his father or anyone else in town woke, drove off and never intended to return. Maybe he’d get into a college somewhere. Although he had poor grades in high school, he knew how to work, could make something of himself. Or maybe for the time being, he’d get a job in a new town, meet new people, even make friends, maybe for the first time have a girlfriend. On that

morning, roads deserted and Clay Center quiet, Teddy drove, but didn't leave. Caught on the edge of a whirlpool, he circled the area over and over. When gas ran low and the sun rose, he went back. Over the next days he lived out of his car until he found an apartment. He got a cleaning job at the school, avoided his father. Everyone began to wonder what happened to Teddy Wills. Why was he so angry? But they also wondered why he still lived in Clay Center?

He stepped off his father's porch and weaved through the crowd. He answered none of their questions and once past, started to run. He needed to catch that police car and cut through yards and alleys. He reached the quarry fence and followed it to the same opening he used as a kid. With dust clouding out everything, the giant quarry was pitch black, aside from a candle flicker of blue and red on the other side. The main entrance was blockaded, so he'd take another path, a switchback left from years ago. It met up with the main road and Teddy would meet his father at the bottom.

To get to the switchback was a steep fifty-foot drop and once he slid down half, tumbled the rest, there'd be no climbing out. There was in fact a reason Teddy had stayed in town. For most of his life he had believed in his father and it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair his father let him do so. He stepped from the quarry edge, grabbed rock and dirt to slow his fall onto the old road. He hit with a clap and was ready to find his father now. For this past year Teddy had waited around for one reason. He'd waited for the chance to see his father fail.

After his mother left, Teddy stopped talking about his dad's strength at school, with neighborhood kids, around the house. In doing so he became quiet, read a lot, listened to music in his room or took long walks. Whenever Ron wanted to do something together, Teddy came up with an excuse. Not like he shunned his dad, just as he grew to a teenager found it hard to talk to him. Ron wanted to change this and one day shortly after Teddy started his sophomore year of high school, he asked Teddy to follow him to the town junkyard.

"If there's one good thing I can teach you," Ron said, "It's how to fix a car." He pointed to a rusted Cutlass, a box with a cracked windshield, flat tires, and more rust than gray on the body.

"For you," Ron said. "We'll have a year to work on it."

"I don't know if that'll be enough," Teddy said.

"Sure it will, long as we can get it out of here."

"You can fix this?"

"With your help," Ron said. "I worked in that auto shop for almost ten years." This was his dad's job before the strongman business.

"You remember how?"

"When you do something for so long, you don't easily forget."

The same was true for Teddy. At fifteen, he was too old to speak of some things, but he hadn't forgotten.

"So how are you getting this home?" Teddy hung back, waited.

"I'll push if you'll steer," Ron said.

"Oh sure," Teddy jumped in.

True, after the scandal his dad had gathered everything in the house from the show and thrown it in the garbage. On that same night, while his parents

slept, Teddy pulled it all out of the trash. He kept it hidden in a box in his closet. The world had come to seem so ordinary; sometimes he needed to look at those pictures in awe, reread old magazine articles, and even frayed, with a few garbage stains on it, he needed to hold the red and blue uniform up to the light and stare.

His dad leaned into the car. Before pushing, Ron coughed and had to catch his breath. Then he walked the car forward. Teddy steered out of the junkyard, but his dad stopped, again coughing. This wasn't the first time. For the past week Teddy had heard his dad coughing in the night.

"What's going on?" Teddy asked. "You getting sick?"

"Been cold in the quarry. Hole's getting so deep we barely see sun at the bottom."

"Tell you what," Teddy said, jumping out, "I'll push instead." His dad laughed at this. Sure the one hundred pound kid should push the man who weighed thrice that.

"You doubt me?" Teddy asked.

"Not a chance."

So Ron jumped in the car and Teddy positioned himself behind. Ron made it look easy. The old Cutlass seemed cemented down. Teddy leaned into it, breath quickening, arms and legs shaking. Slowly, the road began to grind under the tires. The car moved just a few inches, but once he found momentum Teddy didn't stop until the car was all the way home.

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Halfway into the quarry, giant walls blocked the sight of houses and streetlights. Teddy saw enough

shadow to feel his way down the path. Within minutes he managed to catch the police car, which crawled around corners while he leapt jutting rocks and sprinted steep paths. As the roads descended, they intersected. When the quarry flattened, Teddy tailed the car and neither the sheriff nor his father seemed to notice.

When worked, the quarry was full of echoes. All Teddy heard now was the car skidding to a stop. So far he hadn't seen much damage, just some fallen rock. When the car parked on a slope and its headlights pointed at the north wall, he saw why the whole town had shaken, why grown men ran to his father for help, why this rockslide might mean the end of the quarry and maybe even Clay Center.

The crack in the wall was like a lightning streak. This was just the surface. Past the headlights and deep under town, splintered earth went on. Giant hunks of rock hung like loose puzzle pieces; a good yell might bring them down. What had already fallen left a void in the wall—big as if the moon fell from the sky. Rubble littered the ground, burying equipment and any sign the area was ever clear. Teddy feared for those men, and for the first time since coming down here, he feared the quarry would swallow him too. He considered turning around, considered running. Then his dad got out of the car. Ron looked ahead at the broken landscape and closed the car door behind him. Seeing this, Teddy knew there could be no turning back.

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It was in his weakness when people in Clay Center finally began to believe in Ron Wills' great strength. On the same night Teddy pushed that

junked car home, Ron began to cough worse. He soon developed pneumonia and a lung infection that would last nearly two years. Doctors confined him to bed and many had thought him headed for the worst. But sometime near the beginning of the illness, strange and impossible things started to happen. The rumors of who and how ran rampant, but only at first. Eventually these rumors became a theory.

People guessed that after the scandal with his show, Ron wanted a simple life. He acted ordinary and fooled everyone. When he got sick there was only one way to reclaim his body from the illness. He had to turn to his strength.

Weak and frail, fearing he'd be sent home otherwise, an ill Ron snuck into the quarry in the middle of the night. At first dirt would be shoveled from a truck, maybe tools sorted for the next day. Aside from jokes of a phantom, no one noticed. The illness limited Ron's body, not his perseverance. Soon piles of rock were hauled across the quarry and holes dug for dynamite. Conveyer belts that normally took an entire crew to unload, were emptied.

Many tried to peer into the quarry, but it was dark as a pit of tar. Even the sheriff's spotlight did little. Some workers once guarded the entrance, yet by morning the work had still been done. The need for speculation didn't last. There was one bit of evidence, a letter left in the quarry: signed Ron Wills, simply, politely, asking to get back on payroll.

So he collected paychecks and won over skeptics. There were midnight sounds of rock shattering, markings of knuckles on clay, and most obvious to anyone who glanced into the quarry by morning, were hunks of limestone. In the first months, pieces weighing hundreds of pounds and big as a person

were lifted onto belts. Near the end of the two years, these grew so big they looked like elephants in the back of dump trucks.

Ron didn't only use his strength in the quarry. He wanted to make town a better place. On walks to work, nights he occasionally took off, he wandered around bending things here and there, pounding sidewalks flat and on other occasions, he saved lives. It took two years before he reemerged in town. By then he looked healthy, weight and muscle back; he no longer coughed or wheezed. Instead of returning to the quarry, he got a job at the hardware store. It wasn't a ceremonious return. Ron was modest by nature. He wouldn't talk about the quarry and refused gratitude for saving those lives. With his health back, he wanted to act completely normal and everyone in Clay Center respected that. To his face, he was Ron. Anywhere else, he was Iron Ron. No matter how normal he acted, no matter how much time passed without the need for a hero, no one forgot just how strong Ron Wills really was. Well, almost no one.

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For a moment Ron stood next to the police car and stared across the quarry floor. Teddy wondered if his dad was thinking the same thing as him. Were any of those men alive? When the ground started rumbling, they supposedly made a run for it. The rock crushers were heavy pieces of equipment too. Maybe there was a chance they were alive. Maybe.

"You ought to get out of here," Ron said to the sheriff. "It's not safe."

"Can you really dig those men out?" the sheriff asked.

Hiding behind a boulder, Teddy slid closer.

“I’ll do what I can,” Ron said.

“You don’t think your boy will be any more trouble,” the sheriff asked, “Trying to come down here or anything? I don’t need him getting hurt.”

Teddy expected his dad to say nah, shrug his shoulders or something.

“The thing about Teddy,” Ron said, “You needn’t worry. He’s a good young man, and a good son despite what anyone thinks.”

Teddy was so surprised he almost fell forward. At that moment more than any other, he wanted to stay hidden and pushed himself tight on the wall.

“I suppose you’d know,” the sheriff said. He gave his father a flashlight, wished him luck and drove back up the road. Once the rattle of the engine drifted off, Teddy heard the clomping of footsteps on stone. Glowing from the flashlight beam, magnified by dust and distance, Ron’s shadow looked huge. This wasn’t what made Teddy think he might understand why people confused his father for a hero. Never hesitating, the way the shadow moved courageously ahead surprised Teddy, and he had to follow the echo of those footsteps deeper in.

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One morning just before he finished high school, Teddy woke to find his father sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. Not too unusual. As Ron got better, things returned to normal. Teddy would find his dad doing push-ups and sit-ups in the living room, or back to old chores, fixing things around the house, finishing work on that old car.

Since his dad had recovered, something lingered in the house, almost like the air was heavy whenever they were alone. It had nothing to do with the illness, not necessarily the rumors or strange things occasionally still happening, but with the fact that Teddy and his father never once in the past two years discussed those odd things.

“You ought to see this,” Ron said, folding the newspaper and sliding it across the table.

“Those are depressing,” Teddy said. “I haven’t read one in years.” Not since they’d slandered his father.

“I think you’ll find this article interesting,” Ron said, “Hits kind of close to home.” Ron stood from the table and got more coffee.

While sick, the person Ron talked to most was Teddy, and they mainly discussed the illness. Both eventually knew of the rumors around town. Maybe like Teddy, his father was afraid to jinx things. People saw his dad as a hero. No need for discussion. Although a few times, reporters from the cities had driven out, asked about things happening at night. Luckily, knowing Iron Ron’s past relationship with the media wasn’t ideal, no one said a thing. However on the paper’s back page, a headline read, *Mysterious Man Stronger than Steel???*

“Check out the picture,” Ron said.

Teddy saw a small black and white photo of a pick-up truck. It looked like a cannonball had hit it. The front was smashed straight to the engine. Whatever hit the truck, the caption read, hit with so much force all the windows shattered.

“Wow,” Teddy said. “That’s something. The driver was okay, wasn’t he? Did the article say if he was hurt?”

“He was fine, an out-of-towner here drinking. He was about to crash into an apartment building.”

“Did the driver see what stopped him?”

“No. He didn’t see, who, hit the truck,” Ron said. “Like I said, he was drinking, but he was sure it was a person.”

“That’s something,” Teddy stood from the table. “I should get ready for school.”

“You know what everyone in town will say,” Ron said. “They’ll say it was me.”

Teddy backed toward the hallway and before turning said, “Who else?”

“That’s a good question.” Ron followed Teddy to the hall. “That’s a real good question. How is it possible, Teddy?”

Teddy closed the door in his bedroom. He heard his father’s heavy footsteps in the kitchen again. He waited for him to leave. It was a good question: how was such a thing possible? But an even better one, why was his dad asking it?

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Hunks of rubble mounded the path and following his father, Teddy stepped clumsily over. The closer they came to the site of impact, the bigger the boulders and clumps of dirt, until they reached what looked like a graveyard. Buried skeletons of bulldozers, cranes, and plows flashed as Ron scanned with the light. In some areas, broken limbs of metal poked through. The conveyer belts had been snapped to toothpicks, but that was light steel, practically aluminum compared to the rock crusher.

Hiding behind machinery, Teddy stepped silently and stifled his breathing. For all his effort, he

practically ran into him when Ron suddenly stopped. There was something ahead, taller than anything else, a boulder like a semi. As if a giant turtle, legs of steel poked out under. This was the location of the rock crusher. Even if those shows had been real, his father had never, ever, moved anything so heavy.

Ron studied the boulder regardless. Teddy could admit his dad had a way of assessing things. That's probably why he'd been a mechanic all those years ago. Ron grabbed a steel rod off the quarry floor and swung at the giant stone. It banged, echoed. Teddy worried about another cave-in, until he realized what his dad was doing. There was a sound like a drum—an air pocket below. Teddy smiled, almost clapped, and Ron threw his arms up.

He set to digging, and for an old guy, impressed Teddy by tossing rocks like they were no more than basketballs. They thudded on the dirt and between these Teddy heard something else: voices. His dad stopped. Even sounding distant, under that boulder those men were alive. With the small debris aside, Ron finally moved forward to the giant rock.

“I’m going to get you out,” he yelled. “Hold tight!” And he said this like he believed it. For the sake of those men Teddy wished it true. But no matter what he wished, he couldn’t forget last year. He couldn’t forget what he had learned.

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That same day he and his father discussed the newspaper article about the runaway truck, Teddy skipped school. Before the illness had worsened, Ron took that junkyard Cutlass apart. For two years it sat scattered in the garage. As he got better, as his body

recovered, he rebuilt the car. The engine ran smooth; there wasn't a speck of rust left. Teddy hadn't yet driven it. Supposed to be a graduation gift, he promised he wouldn't. His dad worked hard too, but he needed to know something and in order to learn this, he had to leave Clay Center.

While taking care of his father and taking care of bills, he learned of a storage unit where his dad sent money. Ron said it was nothing, just old junk. Among the stuff Teddy had in his closet, Iron Ron's costume, pictures, articles, there was something he figured he picked up from the pile in the garbage on accident: a key.

He arrived late in the morning, found the unit, and grabbed the key and their bathroom scale—the one other item he needed for verification. Opening the door, Teddy found the unit covered in spider webs and dust. Even so, blue and red streamers sparkled, bent bars of steel cast shadows like snakes, and anchors and cinderblocks spilled over from corners. Pushing the door up, gears ground and scraped and Teddy almost thought he heard an echo of applause. He hesitated, almost turned back. He had to know for sure.

The first thing Teddy wanted to check was the first thing he ever saw his father lift: that old green station wagon. He climbed to it in the back, bent and grabbed the bumper. He hoped, really hoped the car weighed a good ton or two. When he stood he fell backwards and the car tumbled across other props. It was hollow. It looked entirely real but a closer inspection revealed a lawnmower engine under the hood. The paint was some kind of metallic coating that after years was chipping through to plastic. Same with the dumbbells, the five-hundred pounders only

weighed a tenth of that. The chains were made of glass to shatter easily. The bricks, when Teddy dropped them, were baked so dry they crumbled. The stage was full of sound equipment, special lights, wood platforms designed to bend, and worst of all when he tore it apart, giant magnets underneath. Just like that reporter had claimed.

Teddy walked out and locked the unit. He snapped the key in half, got in his car, and returned to Clay Center. Over the next days he avoided his father, finished school, and planned to leave town and never look back. Then the morning came when he packed up his belongings and tried to go. Turning back time and again, town a shadow in the rearview mirror, he couldn't leave. So he faded into the cover of secrecy and for a year told no one what he found. When his father tried to contact him, he never responded. No, he just waited for a day when once and for all he could forget he ever believed in that weak man.

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The boulder was solid rock, nothing fake about it: no fancy stages, magnets, or special props. That didn't stop his dad from stretching his shoulders and cracking his knuckles. Ron took off the coat that might bind his arms. He clenched his fists, took a few deep breaths. Then he found the perfect stance to hunch down and push with his legs as well as arms.

"I'm going to try," Ron said to himself.

Teddy had seen all that fake stuff, seen his father work like a normal man in the quarry. It wasn't real. It couldn't be. But only a few steps away, Teddy didn't interrupt now. Ron lunged at the boulder. His hands gripped the rock so tight dust sprinkled to the

ground. His back inflated. The muscle in his arms stretched the shirt and seams strained. Ron grunted; his teeth gritted. He closed his eyes and pushed. Teddy watched his father's breath puff, watched his legs and arms shake. He watched the veins through layers of age work their way to the surface. Teddy watched all this, and in the silent cold quarry, he didn't dare blink.

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Ron Wills had been sick. Everyone in town knew that. Only Teddy saw it up close though. He watched his father go from a colossal man to one whose clothes hung loose, skin turned pale, one who lurched when he walked. For a while Ron said he just had a bug and continued to work. Until the day he passed out in the quarry and had to be carried home. Then things got worse and people didn't see him for a while. But everyone knew he recovered; so there had to be a moment when everything began to turn around.

It was late autumn in fact, winter encroaching. Like most days Teddy came home from school, cleaned the house, made dinner, sat next to his dad's bed and helped him eat when he got weak. He made sure he drank plenty of liquids, even helped him to the bathroom.

"I'm sorry," Ron said. "I'll be better soon, I promise."

"I know," Teddy said. His dad needed time. That's what doctors said. They prescribed medicine, but in recovering from the infection he was on his own. Time was also a problem. Weeks earlier his sick pay had run out, then so did the savings. Food ran low,

bills stacked up, late notices came and someone from the bank stopped by about the mortgage. Even the prescriptions were almost empty. A few weeks ago they ran out for just a day and his dad coughed up blood.

Instead of going to bed that night, Teddy sat at the kitchen table. Cool air took over outside. Neighbor's lights clicked off. Cars no longer rumbled down the street. For the past few weeks, he could hardly eat, couldn't focus at school, but he sat not on account of his worries, not on account of bills or medicines. He sat tonight because he was waiting. When quiet enough outside, he stood and walked to his father's room.

"Dad," Teddy whispered. Ron didn't move, didn't open his eyes.

"I know you're asleep," Teddy walked into the room and leaned on the edge of the bed. "But I came in here to tell you, I'm going out for a little while."

Teddy was fifteen. In the past months he'd learned to do laundry, cook, pay bills. He'd learned to take care of a house, of a very sick man. He'd learned to do things kids his age didn't often have to.

"It's going to be okay," Teddy said. "I know you've been asking about money, how much is left and all, but it's going to be okay. I have a plan." His dad shivered even with sweat on his forehead. Teddy pushed the blankets up.

"I want you to know," Teddy said. "I haven't forgotten any of it."

He then walked through deserted streets and alleys toward the center of town. The closer he got, the colder and quieter the air became. When he leapt the perimeter fence, the lights of town seemed far away as stars. Here the whistle of wind was replaced by an

overwhelming nothing. Though he hadn't seen it anywhere else, frost covered the dirt sloping down. He couldn't see more than a few feet into the dark void, and staring at it, his bones went numb.

He indeed had a plan. At night he'd work. During the day he'd go to school, come home, take care of his father and sleep for a few short hours before starting all over again. The burden would be heavy. He had to work, work hard enough that quarry workers took notice, the town took notice. But he was still a kid, still scrawny. The quarry was dangerous during the day, not to mention at night. And what if, well in the time since the show ended, Teddy had aged. It's not like at fifteen he hadn't considered the claims by the reporter, points other kids made, things everyone, even his mom, said.

There was no time for doubt though. So Teddy lifted his foot, plunged it into the lake of darkness. When he did, he swore he saw a ripple and he remembered the souvenirs in his closet, remembered how he felt when he held that uniform to the light, remembered too when he felt alone in the past, when he needed to believe in strength and though just a kid, carried a metal pipe twice his size home, or the time he pushed a junked car miles without stopping for a moment's rest. He remembered watching Iron Ron lift a car over his head, metal bending and rock crumbling. He remembered the impossible, and he descended into the dark deep quarry.

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The boulder never moved. It didn't budge an inch. That didn't stop Iron Ron Wills from trying. His muscles flared, knees shook, and fingertips—

scraping against the rock—began to bleed. Iron Ron tried with every ounce of strength he had, and then he collapsed in front of the boulder, dust swirling as he fell.

For this past year Teddy had been angry, but he'd also been alone. Sure, he never fit in here. His mother left and he found it hard to talk his father. During the illness, aside from school and caring for his dad, Teddy did nothing aside from work. But he always had one thing. As night after night he descended into the depths of the pit—pushing always to the edge of possibility—as his bone and muscle grew denser, so too grew this one thing: belief in what was possible. Considering what he could do, he'd thought his dad was the same.

“You must be rusty,” Teddy said. He waved the dust from his father's face.

“When I got real sick,” Ron said, “I heard the rumors around town, and even when I was in bed all day, I knew what was going on. I used to check your room at night. You were never in there. That's when I knew. I knew it had to be you.”

His dad kept his secret and Teddy appreciated that. He didn't do those things in the quarry, or especially the things around town, for credit. He did them because he'd grown up believing in a hero. He reached down and offered his hand. Teddy wasn't sure what was going to happen after this. He supposed there wasn't going to be much of a Clay Center. He'd finally leave town, make sure his dad did too. In the rubble some of the men called for help.

“Why don't you sit this one out,” Teddy said. He lifted Ron to his feet and without another moment of hesitation, stepped up and spread his arms around the boulder.

“I got it,” Teddy said, fingers digging into rock, his jaw clenching, muscles tensing, and the ground like thunder moving below them, beginning to shake.

“I’ve got it.”

# **ROBERT JOE STOUT**

## **perfect for it**

The heavy metal door sent echoes clanging through the industrial park as Kerry Rodriguez slammed the catch closed and locked it. For a moment he stood squinting into the dirty twilight, a squat powerful man with a round face and bristly black beard that gave his expression a petulant intensity. A faint breeze brought a touch of relief from the mugginess that had made the afternoon seem stagnant and stifling. Through it the glittering neon on Avenida Roble, half a block away, pranced hazy promises of food, tires, refrigerators, dancing lessons.

Kerry strode towards them, peering from side to side at the dozen or so people clustered around parked cars and garbage cans. An old woman shied away as he approached, little rodent-like twitches of hurt and fear visible through the shawls she had wrapped around her face. He did not speak to her—no one in this part of Mexico City spoke to strangers on the street. Even old women, as helpless as they might appear, could be decoys for ruthless *chamacos* who needed only to know in which pocket a passer-by carried his wallet.

He crossed himself, out of habit more than for reverence of anything holy, the *Our Father* he repeated so many times after confession sliding through his thoughts. But once into the flow—pedestrians bumping and shoving their way past boxes of trash put out for collection, signboards and

tiny vendors' kiosks—he took a deep breath and tucked his hands into his jacket pockets. The acrid odors of oil and gasoline mingled with closer, more pungent aromas of charred meat and scalded cooking grease. He stopped momentarily, savoring the smell of carne asada being grilled over charcoal just inside the open window of a street-side restaurant.

Before he could turn away a Suburban swerved against the curb in front of him. A small man with a twitching mustache jumped out and opened the back door to let two laughing couples emerge. The women were much younger than the men; their tight skirts clung to their hips and their laughter was tinted with expensive perfume.

“*Narcos!*” Kerry heard someone behind him on the sidewalk hiss but he didn’t turn or respond. He was climbing the stairs into the restaurant, a woman as beautiful as either of the two he had just seen clinging to his arm. Beto—his friend Beto, whose SUV Kerry had converted into an armored projectile—had asked him, “What’s holding you back? You’re perfect for it. You were born in the U. S., you speak both languages, you have the ideal profession. You could make three, four, five-hundred thousand dollars a year! More!”

And there’s no risk, Beto had insisted. “The judge for this district is *vendido*—bought off already. You build special compartments in cars to hide what needs to be hidden, maybe make a few trips across the border. You would be rich forever!”

*Rich forever.* Despite the noisy street, the dirty night, the noxious fumes Kerry could feel the young woman’s breasts brush against his arm. *Anything you want...* she was promising him. He could feel her nipples slowly tighten beneath his touch, taste her

perfume as she leaned forward to kiss him. *Anything you want, anytime, anywhere...*

“*Cuidado!*”

The shouted warning brought him back to the Avenida’s traffic and grime. Two men balancing a heavy metal pole over their shoulders veered around him.

Kerry watched them round the corner. Every time Beto started that coaxing he felt his will power begin to waver. *Any kind of woman you could want*, Beto had said once. *From any part of the world...*

He paused in front of pharmacy before he stepped inside. The woman behind the counter recognized him and smiled. Carefully he unfolded the prescription and handed it to her.

“*Momentito.*” She disappeared behind a high set of metal shelves packed with display boxes, bottles and packages of diapers.

“*Gracias,*” Kerry mumbled, feeling as he always did deceitful, criminal. But since his wife’s illness leaving the house had become increasingly more difficult for her so the year before, when she had changed doctors, she’d registered under his name so he could get the prescriptions for her, “Kerry” being so uncommon a name in Mexico City that no one questioned its gender.

The pharmacist himself brought out the capsules. He pulled at thick, graying eyebrows as he squinted at Kerry.

“*Mira, señor,* you must be very cautious with these. An overdose could...” he paused “...be very damaging.”

“*Sí pues,* I am careful, very careful,” Kerry nodded. I should come in looking more desperate and helpless, he told himself as he wriggled his wallet out

of the front pocket of his tight jeans and signed for the narcotics. Before stepping back onto the street he slid them into the inner pocket of his denim jacket. *You do it anyway—legally—why not make money at it?* Beto had laughed more than once. “But this is for my wife! She needs it!” he had countered. “It’s all the same,” Beto had shrugged. “The ones you’d get it for need it, too. Why not get some of the good things before you die?”

*The good things.* Again Kerry felt soft flesh move against his body, scented lips brush his ear. Looking up he realized that he was in front of the restaurant he’d seen the narcos and their consorts enter. They were up there drinking, eating, the women with their fingers on the narcos’ thighs. *Anything you could want...* Beto had teased. *Blondes? Voluptuous blondes? As many as you might want?*

Kerry turned away. Before he could reach full stride a hissed whisper stopped him.

“*Señor? Aquí!* Something for you.”

Chubby cheeks smirked a conspiratorial smile as the speaker reached for the handle of a delivery van parked at the curb. He slid it far enough open that Kerry could see a shadowy form inside. “*Jovencita.* Very clean. She will do whatever you want.”

He opened the door further. The woman inside the van slid around to face Kerry. She was wearing a short skirt and a blouse unbuttoned to expose all but the nipples of her breasts. She seemed to tremble, from the chill night air or fear Kerry couldn’t be sure, as she pulled her skirt higher to reveal dark pubic hair. *Just a teenager...* Kerry realized.

“*Trescientos pesos.*”

He couldn’t get his feet to move. Her skin was soft. Smooth. Her trembling made her all the more

exciting. Her breasts as he squeezed them were very firm. She winced, crying out slightly as he squeezed them more tightly, squeezed them and slid between her open legs, felt her tightness around him, her hips moving, slowly at first, then more rapidly, her hands clinging to his wrists, her heels hammering the backs of his thighs...

*“Muy limpia... two hundred and fifty...”*

Lurching backwards he peered into the procurer's smiling face. “Just two-hundred-and fifty... do anything you want...” he heard the words but sensed Beto's voice, Beto insinuating, *You're perfect for it, what's holding you back?*

“There is no danger, I will stand guard...” Kerry wasn't sure whose voice it was, the procurer's or Beto's or someone else's, someone inside his head. He fought against them, resisted the impulse, the hips opening, the nipples against his tongue.

*“No, no, chingada que no,”* the laughter—his own—more apologetic than he'd intended. *Apologetic to whom?* he wondered, striding away. *Myself? All of them? God?*

His heart still pounding he turned off the Avenida onto the alley that led to the industrial park. *One carburetor more and I can drive home, eat a little meal, watch TV for an hour with Candida...* Looking up he saw the shawled old woman he'd passed a short while before hunched against the barred grate outside a closed repair shop. She averted her gaze the second she sensed his attention. He hesitated a moment then stepped towards her.

“Here,” he said as he wriggled his wallet out of his jean's pocket. She would not lift her hand to take the hundred peso bill he offered so he slid it beneath one of her shawls and strode away, drawing the sign of

the cross across his chest. Then stopped abruptly, wondering:

*Maybe she's not so old after all?*

# **GRAHAM TUGWELL**

## **last girl against the wall**

### **I**

They came to me, closing in a wall of bodies and faces, grins doing strange things to eyes and to mouths, all tight black things with glitter inside. But the one at the heart and head of the girls was the worst.

Mancey Claskey.

A little thing in eleven angles—face sharp triangular, ears rising points through thin brown hair. A tip of a tongue too big for her mouth showed itself between words, between sentences. She stared with the shocked blue crystal of her eyes and her voice was sharp and sweet and soft: “You know how to do it, don’t you?”

Slowly my head shook a tentative *no*.

She batted lashes, cocking her head in a simpering pout. “It’s not your first time is it?” Three finger-tips on parted lips, a play of shocked delight for her friends: “Don’t tell me, you’re the *last* to... Oh poor thing, we’ve all done it, haven’t we, girls?” and she spurred them into a chorus of “Yes!” All leering grins, secrets implicit in wet exposing gums and teeth.

Almost violent the second shaking of my head, saying a blunt and breathy “No!” making grins slash open in increasing white. She narrowed her eyes, unbeliefing. Time stretched and I was alone against the wall of girls. “Show us how it’s done,” said Mancey Claskey, a finger into my sternum and she a devil in

angles acute. I bit my lip, feeling the uprush of tears. “I... I...”

She aimed a sneer at the collected girls. “I knew it,” she said. “We’ll make it a lesson, so.” She spoke slowly, nodding with every word as if understanding was beyond me. “Press the tip... against the roof of your mouth... Right in the center... In here...” She put a finger in her mouth, showing me where it went.

I swallowed and followed her instructions. The sharp plastic tip ran the soft rungs of my upper palate as it settled in place. “Now hold it there,” she whispered. “Ready?”

A delicate nod from me and you’d think her grin could go no wider but—suddenly she slapped a palm against the base of the can. The explosive hiss, sharp and loud like a little bomb, filling the hollows of my head, and my eyes, I thought my eyes would be pushed or popped, surely *something* had to go, then the cold burn of chemicals making me retch. I tried to spit but Mancey, up on tiptoes, slapped a hand over my mouth, pushed my head back to crack the stucco wall.

“Don’t breathe out,” she laughed. “Hold it in!” and my lips she pinched with finger and thumb. She led her girls in giggles as I struggled. A head taller than any girl there, weighing more than any two together, I should have fought them off.

But I wanted to do this.

I wanted to be there and do this with them.

Part of the group.

Someone for once.

I swallowed.

The first day we were friends we lined up along the wall, six girls from my class, backs to dirty white pebbledash. I was last in line, standing where the pavement ran out. Mancey Claskey walked along us, nodding as we were assessed.

Then, from behind the bins she pulled it out—a plastic bag of aerosol cans. They rattled hollow as the bag shook, silver bullets jostling. We gathered in shadows and stared. Only one had a label—foreign writing, yellow upon red, lost and found under rolling silver.

“Where’d you get them?” asked Caroline Dunne. Mancey pressed a finger to her lips. “It’s a secret.” “But what are they?” asked Bethany Cosgrove.

A laugh from Mancey. “That’s a secret too.” Her wink a flash of blue as she turned to me. “New girl gets first pick,” and she held out the rustling bag. “It’s only fair, girls.” They tittered; wind chimes, waiting birds. I looked at rolling silver and chrome, soft round bases bulging inwards like metal pockmarks. “Put your hand in,” whispered Mancey, “And pick one.”

“What...?” She left that unanswered, just nodded towards the opening. I reached in, feeling tickling plastic the length of my arm, cold metal bumping my fingertips. They rolled over each other, rolled away teasing.

I grabbed one.

Shock of cold on the palm of my hand.

“This one,” I said. “This one, please.”

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It was a forgotten place in those days; a strip of land behind the dilapidated hall, never more than ten

feet wide. In that gap a single towering pine, only the trees at the Protestant graveyard taller. It made the ground soft and deeply scented with sharp discarded needles, its span of leaves clearing the ground of grass and nettles. Both were banished to the far end, where they grew amidst the shine and color of rubbish thrown. Disconsolate windows studded the building back, untended, uncleaned, unopened. There for trapping flies and letting in a milky light. They looked over an old and broken wall, at rusting, overloaded bins.

You couldn't go behind the oil tank. You couldn't go into the field. And you certainly couldn't go behind the hall—all forbidden places.

But all of us, at one time or another, broke those rules. Boys and girls would go behind and play their games. Share secrets and special things.

And me, a dull girl, a nothing girl; too big for my age, too plain to talk to, sitting there on the outside of things, watched and wondered what all those other lives were like. I went to secret places when no one was there, as if I could absorb experience through my skin.

The smell of oil behind the tank.

The sight and sound of sheep in the field.

The feel of the rope hung high in the pine.

Not enough.

I wanted to know for real.

I'd see the nod pass among the girls in my class, the winks and growing smiles. At lunch they'd move off together, slowly, casually, not wanting to draw the attention of teachers. Then, when everything was clear, when the only eyes on them were mine, they'd dart into shadows and girls would be gone. Sitting on the wall I'd eat my lunch and long to be part of things...

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Grainne Staines was a heavy girl. Her face made of freckled planes, her little nose and eyes and mouth gathering for warmth and comfort in an expanse of flesh. I knew her, sort of. We had sat together in class for a month.

She was the one I asked.

“When you go,” I hissed with the teacher’s back to the class. “When the group of you go... Can I come too?”

Grainne looked at me, eyes disappearing in a slow freckled blink.

“I won’t be any trouble,” my voice high and quick, “I’ll do what you tell me. I’ll bring things if you need things. I’ll...” but I’d run out of things to offer. “I won’t be any trouble...”

She bit her lip and blinked again and her little mouth was a rose in flesh. “I’ll have to ask Mancey. See what she says. Because...”

And so much unspoken in that because.

By the start of big lunch it had been decided.

Sitting on my own I felt the cool of a shadow blocking the sun.

“She says you can come with us,” said Grainne Staines.

I went.

Everything happened from there.

\*\*\*

The aerosol exploded in me and I gulped and struggled and swallowed it down—fire in me, deep unkillable fire. Mancey Claskey let me go and I stumbled

on dirt and leaves, ending in long grass and nettles. I cut my palm on a crumpled can.

The other Grainne stood over me. “Is she crying? I think she’s crying. Oh God!” She covered her mouth to hide her smile, but sharp ends showed on either side.

I got a word out. I got out a noise.

(I watched a horse give birth once. The *roar* when the foal got stuck halfway and ropes were needed.)

With that I was gone from my body—falling away, rushing, limbs lost in buzzing soft, feet and hands endless miles away, unrecoverable parts. Slow pulsing heart birthing a bubble in my brain and claiming that space. Dark came into my eyes from the edges, clouds and squares in black and white, sizzling in and out of purple. I’m no longer breathing and couldn’t care less.

Just the taste and the cold—

Just the *taste*—

It’s.

Oh.

\*\*\*

Coming back to myself, yet still some distance away, I noted my nose in the dirt, the pain in my knees where gravel cut and found, with mild surprise, that I had vomited. I could point—that was breakfast, over my hands, while all *that* down my pinafore was lunch.

And laughing, girls were laughing.

“What?” I mumbled. “Wha’s wrong with me?”

“She’s really sick,” someone whispered. “She’s... shouldn’t we be...?”

“She’ll be *grand*,” and that was Mancey speaking. “Won’t you be *grand*?” She laid that question light on my retching back and I was sick again, pain and burn

and taste this time, I was there to feel myself turned inside out.

Under the splash I heard the crunch of feet on gravel.

The girls were going.

“Don’t—” A word lost in a bursting mouthful. “*Don’t.*”

But they left me there behind the hall. I tried to get on my feet, but it wouldn’t happen. On all fours for a moment, then on my belly and in my wet, I was blind for an hour or more.

My father came looking when I didn’t come home. I found myself lifted in his arms. “Ah love, ah love,” he whispered, and I could hear each tear in his voice. I was laid on the backseat of the car. We stopped twice so I could be sick. A ditch, a gateway, but the third time I just lifted myself and let myself go out the rolled-down window.

“Ah love, ah love.”

\*\*\*

“What was she doing?” asked Doctor Proufot. Hot rough hands moved my head from side to side.

“I don’t know,” my father said, “I found her like this. She won’t tell me anything.”

“Open your mouth,” the doctor commanded. A strip of soft wood held my tongue down and a light searched the roof of mouth. “Palate,” he muttered. “Scrapes. Punctures. Chemical burns.”

Washing his hands, rubbing them dry on corduroy trousers he asked me again. When I wouldn’t tell him he asked my father to ask me.

But I didn’t tell them anything.

I wouldn’t get any of us into trouble.

## II

Not well enough for school the next day, I spent it in bed, ice cream a chill and sweet balm against the roof of my mouth, and television too. My father took the day off and stayed with me. We didn't talk about what happened.

The next day I was back at school. My father spoke with my teacher. She'd keep an eye on me.

But others were watching me too.

Mancey stopped me in the corridor. Her finger a point against my chest, her voice a cutting blade: "*Did you tell?*" Become the sharpest angles, she folded red in fury, eyes a fierce cracked blue, darkening black in narrowing.

"We... we were worried about you," whispered Grainne Staines and the other Grainne smiled and laughed.

"Did you *tell*?" Mancey repeated, grinding her point against the bone.

It hurt to speak, my voice a croak: "Didn't tell anyone. Didn't, I promise."

She stared, the whites of her eyes lost to black.

"Cross my heart," I whispered. "Cross my heart."

Mollified slightly, Mancey muttered a guttural "Good." Her finger tapped my chest twice. She turned and led her girls away.

"Wait," I whispered. Then shouted, and the word cracked my throat, dragging pain up from the pit of my chest.

They turned and looked at me; bright the doorway beyond, one-point perspective, and six girls staring.

"I... I want to try again." I am a big girl with little words.

The other Grainne hid her laugh.

Mancey smiled. "You *do*?" and the girls brought out their winks and grins.

I came forward a step, wanting to compose myself, to stop my hands from squirming, but unable to. My words were desperate cowering weak. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to do it right. I want to give it another go."

My hands wrung round each other.

*Don't deny me*, I thought. *Please don't deny me*.

"You choose," I said. "The one you think I'm able for." (I was begging, I was craven, but.) "I won't mess it up, I promise. Not this time."

I stared and tried a smile.

Slowly, Mancey returned it.

Together we grinned.

No heart could ever contain that joy.

\*\*\*

"What do you think, girls? Which one will we give her?"

In half-light under the pine, all canisters lined upon the step. Soldiers clad in chrome, standing at attention. She thought for a moment, hand over her mouth, then the other Grainne pointed. "That one," she said. "The last one."

(Yellow writing on red.)

Mancey cracked off its lid, slid the white head from the tube with fingertips and left bare the sharp neck.

"Is it fruit?" asked Grainne Staines. "Does it burn?"

Mancey Claskey grinned and shrugged and bit the tip of her tongue. She held the naked aerosol to me.

I sniffed—chemical stink of apples and vanilla, I choked—one breath indrawn and I was bent in half

and gagging. My eyes streamed; never before such long hot tears. I pushed them back with the heels of my hands, dragged an arm up my face, wiping my nose on my inner wrist.

“Don’t look at me, please,” I gasped.

They were all looking.

“Don’t look at me.”

All I was was something to look and laugh at.

No.

I blinked away tears and set my mouth.

I would do this. I would do this right.

I put the neck in my mouth and held it there, staring at the girls, fixing them against the wall. I took a deep and purging breath and slapped the base of the aerosol, ruining the little healing of my wound. Snap my head around with the crack of my protesting neck—into me a chemical flush.

Sweet, thick, a cloying, but not as bad as the first. I only took a step out of myself, I didn’t go away, not fully. I was sick, just a mouthful, I leaned forward so it wouldn’t go down my front. It plopped a starburst at my feet and I tottered a foot on either side.

But I didn’t fall—there was that. I stayed on my legs and stumbled.

That was victory.

I fell against the wall and used that to prop as my vision went and returned, as the ringing in my head grew and subsided. I found the girls and grinned at them. “Did I do it?” my voice slurring, making me unsure if they were words or just sounds. “Did I do it right this time?”

All of them were staring at me.

“Am I bleeding?” and *urp* a bitter belch. “Am I?” Fingers over teeth found just a droplet of blood. I showed them red. “Whoops,” I laughed.

“She’s... still standing...” whispered the other Grainne, and a sneer of disgust curled her lips to her nose. Mancey was glaring too, her mouth chewing itself with anger. Bethany Cosgrove was white as china.

Away from the wall I staggered, “Have... have I done something wrong?”

“Give me that,” snapped Mancey, and she whipped the canister from my hand, waggling the silver bullet in my face. “You think you’re the only one who can do it?” and each word a spit of venom.

I shook my head, not understanding her fury. Hadn’t I done what they asked me?

“You think you’re *better* than us?”

I shook my head and stammered, “No... I...”

She wiped the blood from the nozzle and put the aerosol in her mouth. “We can do it,” she growled, teeth making dents on the metal. “We can *all* do it!”

The other Grainne murmured a powerless “Don’t,” while the other girls said nothing at all. Mancey Claskey stared at me, sharp shoulders and thin chest heaving. “Watch me,” she whispered, glimmering wet in one eye. “Watch me.”

She slapped the base of the canister.

Her cheeks blew out, her eyes wide and rimmed in red. Rolls of white cloud leaked between her lips and drifted upwards, silent and gentle.

We smelled the stink of apple vanilla.

“Oh God,” gasped Mancey Claskey, hands crabbing up to hold. “Oh God... I’m.”

Down on her knees. The rolling buck of a back as waves of sick worked up to fruition, spraying through teeth in red-flecked beige. She lifted her head, the soup from her mouth lengthening her face with thick and dangling droplets. “Ahhh. Get my... get my... please...”

A shy cord of blood from one nostril.

Both eyes swelling shut.

“Oh no,” cried Grainne Staines. “Oh no, oh no...”

The other Grainne darted forth and snatched the plastic bag of aerosols. “Run!” she shouted.

They ran away.

I was the one who stayed with Mancey Claskey.

I gathered her head onto my lap, smelling her apple and vanilla. Her eyes were shut, lips swollen so her mouth was a tiny gap of glittering black. “Get my... Maaam... oh, please,” and she tried to lift her face.

“Shush,” I said, copying my father. “Shush,” and I ran my hands consoling through her hair. “They’ve gone to get help, Mancey. I’ll look after you.”

She was just a little thing.

I held her when she was still and when she struggled.

I held her when she was sick.

“They’ve gone to get help,” I told her again and again.

An hour passed.

And then, suddenly and silently, our teacher was standing at the corner, framed in the light, looking at us kneeling in shadow. Girls were arrayed behind her.

“She just got a little sick,” I told her and smiled to show there was no panic. “I made sure she didn’t get any in her hair.”

A wall of faces.

Impassive.

“She’s breathing fine now,” I said, and couldn’t shake the quiver from my voice. “She’s going to be okay. Everything is going to be...”

I smiled.

I stroked her hair.

“Look what she did,” said the other Grainne. “Look what she did to our friend!” and the wicked glint in her eye, the finger thrust out to run me through.

“No!” I cried with a crack in my voice. “We were taking it, we were all taking it! The stuff, the cans. We’re a club! We’re like a... a...”

I didn’t have the word for what we were like.

Not looking at me our teacher bent and gently took the sharp of Mancey’s face. “Is that the truth, Mancey?” she whispered. “Is that what you were doing?”

Slow painful slide of eyelids cracking, showing the barest glimmer between. Mancey lifted a hand to be held. “No,” croaked the girl. “She hates us. Hates *me*. Jealous.”

My mouth wouldn’t close. I was frozen. Each heartbeat could have shattered me.

Mancey was weeping. “She *made* me take it. Said she’s hurt me if I didn’t.”

“That’s not true,” I whimpered. “We’re friends, we’re all friends now—”

“I saw her,” sobbed the other Grainne, “I begged her to stop. But.”

Our teacher looked back at collected girls.

One by one they nodded.

Finally, she looked at me. A single clipped sentence: “Come with me.” I trotted after her, like a dog at heel, across the gravel and up the slope.

I looked back. The nurse had come and was kneeling.

Mancey Claskey looked at me and looked away.

Talk of expulsion, but they settled on suspension.  
The drive home was a silent endless.

We got out of the car and he closed his door softly, laying a hand on the sun-heated roof. He couldn't bear to look at me but I looked at him for long moments.

Broken words, lashed together, falling asunder as they were said: "I am very disappointed in you."

We'd never be close again.

### III

I opened the front door.

Mancey Claskey stood on the step.

gray lengths of rain wiped down the day, made her hair hang as dead dark sheets, cut through with ears, hung droplets crystal from nose and chin. Touched her lips with blue.

I looked down and could have closed the door on her and had an ending there.

But.

I took her upstairs to my bedroom. I gave her a towel and she worked it round her head and neck, held the wet thing between hands when done. I stood with my back to the wall and waited.

Her eyes followed the walls of my room around, furniture and posters, curtains and bedsheets. I felt her eyes when they passed over me and fell away.

She spoke. "You... you were the only one who stayed... You."

A length of hair she gathered to bite and mumble through.

"All the rest of them. Never took anything. Too scared. They aren't my friends."

Cracked blue beautiful eyes.

“They’re just people I...”

And she didn’t have a word for it or them.

Silence between us blossomed, threw out shoots and leaves, become a thing that held us both in deep luxurious cloth.

“I’m sorry,” murmured Mancey Claskey, “I’m so sorry, believe me.”

And I could see.

The first honest thing between us.

“I want... please, I want to make it up to you.”

Slowly she brought down the zip of her jacket and took it out.

A plastic bag.

Two aerosols, pressing gentle chrome curves.

I turned and brought my curtains closed.

\*\*\*

So we began to do things together.

The cans—I never knew what they were or where she found them, but we took turns in taking them.

We looked after each other when they brought us away.

Nothing changed at school—she the head and the heart of the girls and I the one outside. A glance or two at times but nothing more. We ignored each other in hallways, walked home alone or with different people.

That was the game and the pretense. That was what was expected of us.

But in my room we were the real and honest things. We had a world there, better than the one outside.

We sat on my bed with our backs to the wall. She slid the head from the aerosol neck and placed it gentle in my mouth.

“Are you ready?”

She knew from the look in my eyes I was.

“Tell me what you see, where you go,” her breath in my ear. “Tell me *everything*.”

She pushed—the scent of flowers and I was deep and soft and far away.

It was bliss.

Nothing could be more important than this.

\*\*\*

Slowly, days began to break up.

Together we'd lose hours, finding a week had passed after only four of five days, and months, the speed of each month was a revelation. We went away and when we came back we brought shine and color with us. Everything became beautiful.

If my father saw a change in me, he never said.

We weren't as close as we used to be.

\*\*\*

“That was a good one,” Mancey whispered, her head the lightest weight on my shoulder as I took away blood from her nose and lips. Her voice was gentle wonder. “I saw... I saw such things... I've never...”

She placed her hand in mine.

“You should try. You should try it.”

Her staring eyes, blue outlined in red, and smiling teeth crooked from bitten metal. I threw the tissue on the pile and took the aerosol. “Any left?” A shake and high silver noise inside.

I looked at her.

“Go,” a soft urging, hair led over my ear. “I'm

here, I'm good, you can go." I winced as I brushed the sharp against the unclosed wound in my mouth then took a breath and took it in, the wooden waxen stink of pine—

The angles of the world opened up for me and I was gone for a thousand days and what I saw and felt were things I'd keep forever yet never know how to place in thoughts or words.

In time I went back to myself and the cold and drab of the village.

"A new record," laughed Mancey Claskey and pointed.

I'd filled two shopping bags.

I joined her in breathless laughter, wiping my face on the sheets. "That one," I said. "Get more of them, whatever they are. They do the trick. They made me feel..."

"Yes?" and she was elven angles in glee.

I shook my head, smiling. "I... Mancey, there's no words, you know that... but you'll get them, won't you?" I reached for the zip of her jacket and played with the little weight. "And Mancey...?"

"Yes?" she whispered.

"You'll tell me, won't you, one day, where you get them?"

She was silent.

"We're friends now, aren't we?"

Mancey gathered limbs, a knotted girl, "Don't ask me, please." Blue eyes bunched in black pain and her voice a soft driven into knees, "It's not... I just... I have to go somewhere I never want to go."

I left it there.

Wouldn't ask her again.

Winter, suddenly, in shocking cold and frosted glass.

“Look,” I said. “What’s this in my mouth?”

Mancey looked. “There’s something... I’ll... Just... let me...”

I let her get a finger in there. She tapped a hardness on the gum behind my teeth. “Fingernail,” she whispered.

The sweet mint I’d taken made me grin, made me laugh. “Ha ha,” I giggled. “So strange... Mancey, do you? Do you’ve the same?” Before I knew it, before she could stop me, I had my thumb in her mouth, deep to the knuckle, and laughing, searched for a fingernail in her. I pushed her against the side of the bed.

I giggled a little, a sudden unsure, and looked in her eyes.

Long, beautiful long moment.

Softly she bit my thumb. I watched her cheeks grow shadowed, felt the tongue along it. “Mancey... is this... is this okay...?” She took hold of my wrist and worked the digit back and forth. She slid it out and held it hard against her lips.

“Take one,” she whispered. “Take one and I’ll make it good for you.”

A hand amidst silver canisters; sleek bodies rolled away from me but I grabbed one, broke its neck against the floor. Watching her guide my hand to stroke I pressed the tube into the roof of my mouth.

Going away in red darkness soft, each word of hers a twist and trail, both felt and heard: “I’ll make you feel good... make you feel the best...”

I went away and she made me.

\*\*\*

With no job to go to my father became ragged—he gave up shaving, gave up getting dressed. Home in the house with me and no words passing between us, he pleaded to be let in, to be let help.

Once, we forgot to clean up after ourselves. Mancey left and I fell asleep beside the toilet. I left my bedroom door unlocked.

He found the belts and pans.

Found the soft bag with the canisters.

Perched on the end of my bed he held up an aerosol. “What is it? What do you do with it?”

“It’s for a play,” and the stuff still in me slithering the words. I pressed myself in the corner of the room, kept myself upright that way. “It’s a play, Da. A play, a play,” the answer for every single question he asked me.

I reached for the bag but I was too slow and unsteady.

I called him a name.

The pale of his face and his fallen mouth.

He said something about my mother.

I found my fingers deep in the skin of his cheek and tearing.

On his back in the doorway he looked at me like he’d never seen anything like me before.

“Don’t,” I screamed. “*Don’t you look at me like that!*”

The taste of iron between my teeth. My wound, opened again.

\*\*\*

Has it been a year?

It has, it has.

More days forgotten than can be remembered.

“Your hair is falling out. *Look.*”

Mancey held up strands, a horse’s tail almost.

“We’ll buy you a hat,” she laughed. “We’ll buy you a hat. A hat!” and she mimed putting one on me, got her hands around me and leaned on me, cheek to my cheek.

Her tongue in my mouth, pressing the hard that was growing there.

My hands were pulling out her hair.

\*\*\*

I was gone when it happened.

A voice drew me back.

Slow opened eyes unfocused, the world colors and shapes in a trembling frame and I laughed at how the picture meant nothing.

The voice again and I waited for it to make sense.

Slowly pieces came together.

My head against the wall I watched my father working on Mancey. His fringe shook down as he pressed his hands to her chest and bounced. I tittered and tried to clap along but the things on the ends of my arms were dead.

He shouted something but it didn’t matter, none of the things he was saying, none of the questions. Mancey spread unmoving on the floor and me, too gone to care. At the center of our soft world the jerkiness sudden of him, laughable frantic, laying a slap to Mancey’s face and screaming.

It brought a little smile to me.

And when he gave in and fell beside her, head buried in his hands, my thoughts rose up, bright, perfect things:

What we have, Mancey Claskey and me...  
Here in half-light...  
Couldn't it almost pass for love?

# **DEBRA FOX**

## **should i care?**

Should I care about you because I hit you with my car? Why did you scramble back onto your bike and keep going, why was that your first instinct? It wouldn't have been mine. I would have slowly gotten myself onto the sidewalk and taken an inventory of my body. I would have written down the license plate number of the car that hit me, but you didn't. Was the bike you were riding too small for you, was it a child's bike? Did you steal it? Is that why you were afraid to get the police involved? I thought you were an adult. You were wiry, there was something adult-like in your manner, in your determination to keep going—almost something gymnastic in the way you fell, then popped right back up on the bike and rode fast away.

Sure, there was ice and snow and slush on the street, and sure, you were riding into a red light and should have been more careful, but I felt for you afterwards. I knew your body must be hurting. You could not have been hit by a car, even one as slow-moving as mine was, and walk away unscathed. I thought about you later that night when your injuries must have been settling deep into your bones. Were you cursing me? Had you seen my face?

I wonder, did you get medical treatment, or don't you have health insurance?

The officer asked me what your race was. I said I thought you were Hispanic, and then a sort of knowing nod that bothered me, followed by, "You know

you're very lucky he didn't try to blame you. A lot of people like him would have. In fact, you don't even know if you actually hit him, do you?"

"Well, I felt a thud, and then I saw him lying in the street in front of me."

"But that could have been something in the road you hit. It was snowy and icy. You can't know for sure."

I did know for sure. I knew I hit you.

"I can't fill out an incident report when you can't even be sure you did anything wrong."

I felt sick for you at that moment.

You see, I was upset that morning. You couldn't have known. I was going to a meeting about my son, who will never be able to live independently. I was going to meet with a woman from the County Office of Developmental Disabilities. I was going to find out what I could do to identify resources for him, when he becomes an adult, and he can't live with me anymore.

I put that meeting off for as long as I could, but a bureaucrat at my son's school looked at me aghast when I answered her, "No, I haven't applied for transitional services yet for my son."

"What are you waiting for?" she asked. I wanted to stab her in the eye.

At the meeting in the dreary conference room with the green plastic chairs, when the woman asked me if I thought my son could ever take a shower by himself, I started crying. I felt silly. I didn't know I could still be made to feel sad in front of this kind of functionary. Or, was I crying because of you, because that is entirely possible. You are somebody. You have a mother and a father. You may have a wife. You may have children, people who care about you, who depend upon you.

You see, what I did to you and how I felt about my

son who is growing into a man, started to run together.

I didn't tell anybody about the accident right away, except for the police of course, if you count that as being "right away." I waited to tell my husband until later that night when we were sitting in our warm house drinking hot tea, in front of the television. I changed the facts of the story slightly when I told him, to make myself look better. I didn't tell him I went to the meeting, and then got back in my car and went to a better neighborhood to order lunch, and that I brought some hot soup and a sandwich into the car, and only after that did I phone the police. It was hours later, hours after the incident. The car smelled of tomato soup, and the soup got cold while I waited on hold for a police officer to even talk to me.

And where were you? Did you even eat lunch that day? Did you get to where you were going in such a hurry? Were you wearing socks? I seem to think you weren't wearing socks, and that you had on canvas sneakers that must have been getting wet in the slush and the snow.

Can you believe that when I went into the sandwich shop, I checked my car for dents? I wanted to know if it really happened, if there was any physical evidence to prove it really happened. Of course, I knew it happened. That thud was sickening.

So yes, I do care about you. I am still thinking about you months later, months after the accident. The spring flowers are all but gone, and hot soup doesn't appeal to me anymore. I hope to never go back to that County Office again. I have since received a letter from them that my son qualifies for transitional services. So, I achieved what I sought to accomplish that day.

What about you?

# **J.R. MILLER**

## **pressure drives the bullet**

### **1.**

If I could, I'd ask my cousin if he puked when he shot his first rabbit or his first deer. I would ask my step-mom's dad if he tossed his cookies after he shot his first duck.

If I could, I'd ask my uncle if he blew chunks when he shot his first Vietnamese soldier. I would ask my dad's dad, my grandpa, the man who shot men in World War II, if everybody vomits when they first kill with a gun.

If I could ask, I would.

### **2.**

My first cap gun was a "good-guy" gun just like the kind the Lone Ranger used on that old black-and-white TV show. The handle was a wood-grain ivory plastic and the barrel and bullet chamber were chrome-dipped, die-cast metal. It was heavy, like a real gun. It came with several rolls of red-paper caps. Each roll contained hundreds of shots that crackled as fast as you could pull the trigger—releasing a small poof of smoke and the sweet smell of burnt gunpowder.

Owning a "good-guy" gun meant I was the good guy in the neighborhood. The other kids, Michael, Shane, and Aaron, had plastic rifles and black snub-nosed revolvers and rubber tomahawks, which meant I always won. I got to shoot all the robbers and all the

Indians because the toy tomahawks never flew straight when thrown and the robbers had to die in a gunfight or they'd be hung in town. The good guys always won.

### 3.

A bullet is momentum. Momentum is the product of mass and velocity. A rapid loss of momentum creates immense force. A bullet is force.

### 4.

We were in fifth grade when we learned of founding fathers, tyrannical kings, patriots, redcoats, and war. Our project was to make something from the time-period. One team sewed a Betsy Ross American flag. The stripes weren't straight and the circle of stars was shaped more like an oval. Another team made a patriot hat from folded newspaper and poster paint, except the paint made the newspaper wet and wrinkled and once it dried, the paint flaked off whenever the hat was moved. Shane and I decided to make a musket.

My dad supplied us with a 2x4 and an old broomstick. We traced the shape of the muzzle-loaded long gun onto the wood and cut. We sanded the wood smooth, glued on the broomstick for the barrel. We painted the gun. We rolled musket ball ammunition from red, white, and blue Play-Doh, and baked them in the oven to dry.

We only got a "B" on the project—not an "A" like the team who made the distorted flag or the team who made the wrinkly hat. Maybe it was because we forgot to glue on a trigger or maybe it was because we put our patriotic musket balls in a plastic Ziploc bag. Or

maybe we got a B because the teacher didn't like guns.

5.

Yosemite Sam shot two six-shooters when he felt Bugs Bunny got the best of him. The Lone Ranger used two Colt .45 Peacemakers to lay down justice. Dirty Harry used a Smith & Wesson Model 29 .44 Magnum to prevent criminals from breathing. Michael used a Remington Model 7400 auto-loading center-fire rifle to take down a 6-point buck. Shane used a Smith & Wesson .38 Special to acquire cash from a liquor store. Aaron used a Walter .22 caliber when he shot that cop in the head—point blank.

6.

They say the guy works magic—respects the craft. He'll wash off all the mud and blood from your fur. He'll clean the clotted mucus that seeped through your nostrils. He'll scrub and buff your rack. He'll give you two obsidian eyes. When he's done, you'll have a new home—hung above the fireplace. To your left, a gun rack holding the rifle that brought you here. To your right, a photograph of a scrawny young boy, 11, maybe 12 years old, his face covered in your blood.

7.

In sixth grade, Aaron had a pump-action BB gun. The more you pumped the lever, the more the air compressed, giving the BB more momentum. One summer day, while his parents were at work, we brought his gun to the basement. Aaron had been gathering items for us to shoot, and today was the

day. First there were the old records he “found” in his brother’s room.

“Won’t he know they’re gone?” I asked.

“He’ll never notice. Besides, he’s never home and they were buried under a pile of clothes in his closet.”

Aaron had tied a loop of string through the center of each record—“Morrison Hotel,” “Some Girls,” “Back in Black”—and hung them from the rafters. He handed me the gun. I missed, my BB hitting the cement wall and flecking off some paint. His shot was a direct hit—the vinyl spun and exploded simultaneously.

My next shot grazed the outside of the circle, cracking a chunk off.

“Man, you really suck.”

“Let me try again,” I said.

After the records were all smashed, after we shot a ceramic beer stein, a mason jar filled with laundry soap, and the head off the little man on a bowling trophy, after his kid sister’s baby doll had a small hole in the hollow head and a loose BB rolling around inside, after shooting the steel pole that held the house up for a terrific ricochet, Aaron pulled out the mother lode of targets—a solid glass 1957 Chevy convertible. The statue was nearly a two-foot-long replica. We set it on the floor and took turns shooting at it. We shot at the headlights, the windshield, and the tires, chipping away the glass, until the force of the last shot caused the car to explode.

“That was awesome,” Aaron shouted.

We were giddy. Glass was everywhere.

“What else can we shoot?” I asked.

## 8.

I searched my whole house. I thought my parents couldn’t hide anything from me. I thought I knew

where to look. After all, I found my mom's pot, my dad's porn. I found every Christmas present since I figured out just who Santa was. But I never found his gun.

9.

Some claim that a young boy, upon his first kill, must mark himself with the blood of his prey by painting his face, or sometimes by drinking the blood. Only after this happens can the young man call himself a hunter.

10.

Shane was always stealing something. When we were in seventh grade, he'd steal Bubble Yum and Twinkies from the convenience store by the bus stop. He did this every day. In ninth grade, Shane took to stealing lighters, condoms, and the occasional beer from a six-pack—never getting caught. Shane joked that he was uncatchable. He'd say, "I'm just that good."

11.

"I bet you never even shot a gun before," Michael said. "Did you ever kill anything?" He was a year younger than me and he was getting ready to go on his first deer hunt.

"Me?" I asked. "Yeah, I shot a gun."

"What kind?"

"I don't know what kind it was, but it was a rifle."

"What did you kill?"

"A duck," I said, "with my grandpa."

I lied. I didn't shoot a rifle—more like a BB gun—but it was shaped like a rifle. And I took the life of a bird, but it wasn't a duck and it was an accident.

Michael took his rifle off the rack and handed it to me. "Be careful," he said. "It's loaded."

I looked through the scope. Pointed it at the photograph of his sister on the wall and lined up a head-shot. I let my finger touch the trigger, lightly at first, then with a little pressure. I moved the gun and watched the crosshairs skate across the girl's face. Outside, a car door slammed. "Shit," he said. "That's my dad." Michael took the rifle from my hands and put it back on the rack. We quickly went to his bedroom, grabbed our baseball mitts, and headed outside.

### 12.

Pick up a bullet. Roll it in your fingers—touch the tip. Clutch it in the palm of your hand and squeeze. What do you feel? Anticipation? Fear? Power.

### 13.

Aaron flunked eighth grade. Years later, after we graduated high school and he still had another year, he decided to quit. Only 17, his parents had signed a waiver and off he went to Marine boot camp, where he spent the next two months trying to get kicked out. When punching the drill sergeant got him nothing but more shit duty, he put a gun in his mouth and threatened to pull the trigger. He was discharged and sent home.

The last time I saw Aaron, a few years later, was on the TV news, handcuffed in a perp walk. The news reporter had explained the officer survived, but was in a coma. She said that the officer was lucky.

### 14.

I don't remember what kind of gun it was. Maybe a Remington; maybe a Winchester. Back then hunters didn't talk in terms of brand, but rather in bullet size or caliber. My dad's rifle was a 30/30. My

dad bought the gun to hunt deer and he never let me touch it.

“A gun is not a toy,” he said when I asked to hold it. He was cleaning the gun after a deer-hunting trip that netted nothing but a hangover.

“I know that.”

“They’re dangerous, a gun can kill.”

“I know that, too,” I said.

He handed me a bullet. “You see how small that is?” he asked. I rolled the bullet in my hand. I pressed my index finger on the tip until it hurt.

“That little piece of metal, if I shot it at the wall, would go in the size of a dime and come out the size of a fucking watermelon. What do you think would happen if it went into somebody’s head?”

I knew what would happen if the bullet struck the head. The bullet would blow the head apart, expose a bloody pulp that used to be a brain. But the question wasn’t asked for me to answer. It never was. I shrugged and slipped the bullet into my pocket.

## 15.

It started as a dare. No, that’s not right. It started as, “I bet you can’t hit that robin.”

“What robin?”

“Up there.” Aaron pointed to the lower branch of a super-tall maple tree. “In that nest.”

At first, I didn’t see it, then it came into focus. “All the way up there?”

“It ain’t that high. I could do it,” Aaron said, “in my sleep.” Aaron pumped the BB gun and handed it to me. “I’ll give you the first shot.”

I aimed high. I swear. I aimed above the nest but close enough to scare it away so that Aaron wouldn’t get a chance to shoot. That stupid robin wasn’t sup-

posed to fly off until *after* the BB ripped through the leaves above its head. It wasn't supposed to fly in the path of the steel ball that ripped through its beak and stripped off half its skull.

## 16.

The revolver's trigger moves backward, the hammer compresses a metal spring in the gunstock.

The pawl pushes the ratchet to rotate the cylinder, positioning the chamber in front of the gun barrel.

The compressed spring drives the hammer forward, the pin fires through the body of the gun, strikes the primer.

The primer explodes, igniting the propellant.

The propellant burns, releasing gas. The gas pressure drives the bullet down the barrel.

## 17.

Michael's first kill hung from the rafters of the garage. He hung from the front haunches, gutted from neck to crotch. The young buck's head leaned to one side, flaunting his near-perfect rack. On the floor, flattened cardboard boxes absorbed the remaining blood. We watched it hang there, not saying anything for a long time. Then Michael dared me to put my head in the organless cavity.

“No way.”

“It's just meat,” he said. “With fur. Come on, man, all the hunters do it.”

“You lie.”

“No, my dad told me. You do it to become one with the animal.”

“It's dead.”

“Yeah, and get this, right after the kill you're supposed to streak your face with its blood.”

“Bullshit.”

“I ain’t making it up. I did it,” he said. “Seriously, you’re supposed to do it on your first kill. Some people splash the warm blood all over their face, but I just put it on my fingers and smeared it... like Indian war paint.”

I reached out and touched the deer, its fur, its hoof. I looked into its eye, now cloudy and deflated.

## 18.

My all-time favorite cap gun was the one my aunt bought for me when my brother and I spent a week at her house. It was a .38 revolver with an all-metal cylinder that held red-plastic cap rings. The cap gun was loud and almost looked authentic. Except the gun had a bright-red barrel plug. This plug made the gun look like a toy, so with the help of my uncle’s screwdriver, I removed it.

Once the plug was out, the gun finally looked real. I imagine it looked just like the gun my friend Shane would use at the liquor store three days before the Christmas of his junior year in high school.

## 19.

The robin lay in the leaves, a bloody pulp where the left side of its face was supposed to be. Its wing twitched one last time. I kicked leaves over it, then threw up behind the tree.

## 20.

I was twenty-six the first time I shot a real gun—a gun with bullets. Rick had a house on a few acres in the sticks of Florida. It was Christmas Day and he picked a grapefruit from a tree and set it on a

fencepost. Earlier that week I had told him the story of Aaron, my cop-shooting friend, and he laughed. He didn't laugh because the cop was shot, but rather because Aaron used a .22.

"A .22 is nothing more than a glorified BB gun." He handed me a few of the bullets and I was surprised at how small they were in comparison to the bullet I stole from my dad many years before. Rick loaded his gun and handed it to me. "Knock that grapefruit off the post," he said.

My heart raced a little. I aimed, braced for the gun's kick and squeezed the trigger. A small crackle.

"Shit, I missed," I said.

"No, you didn't." He pushed the gun barrel toward the ground and set the safety. We walked over to the grapefruit and found a small hole in the skin.

"Where's the bullet?"

"In here somewhere." Rick ripped open the grapefruit and there it was.

"I told you," he said. "Nothing but a BB gun." He picked another grapefruit and stuck it on the post.

"Now, *this* is a gun." Rick handed me a .44 Magnum. "You ever see a real-life Dirty Harry gun?"

The gun was heavy; so much so, I was afraid to hold it. Rick stood behind me. He guided my stance to a proper position.

"Lock your arms," he told me. "This gun has a kick."

One second, I could see the grapefruit ten feet away, resting on the post. I could see the dirt stains on its skin giving the yellow globe a planetary feel. The next second, my arms flailed straight up, burnt gunpowder cleared my sinuses, pulp dripped off my face, and adrenaline raced through me. The bullet vaporized the grapefruit.

“Fuck yeah,” I shouted. “*That* was awesome.”

“Point the gun down,” Rick said. “Set the safety.”

“That was too cool,” I said. “What else can we shoot?”

# **ANNE-MARIE THWEATT**

## **variaciones sobre un rosario**

The wooden beads stained with thin, blood-colored paint show their grain as they are joined one to another to another by links of metal chain. Links: touch secreting memories endlessly, effortlessly. Memories then engage emotion—a time I could sleep through the night.

*I am the smoke of red incense.  
I am a harp played by an angel.  
I am musica banda.  
I am association.  
Understanding usurps unconsciousness upon touch.*

I don't even really remember how to pray a Rosary.

My voice comes, quiet and halting, missing notes... finding its way: "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with Thee. Blessed art Thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death?"

To me, the rosary has always been ornamental; I like the way it looks, the way it feels. The women on my mother's side of the family have amassed a vast collection of them—some jeweled, some made of rose petals, many of multicolored plastic beads—but my favorite rosary was given to me by a friend in rehab. It's a Stanhope rosary. I keep it with the col-

lection handed down by my mother's women, but it's not the rosaries themselves that I'm interested in, or their religious meaning. I'm not religious, and there is nothing I do *religiously*. I said adiós, Didion style. Sometimes I want to think I'm connected in to something larger, something *spiritual*, enlightened, because if I'm connected to something bigger, then my own weight becomes less burdensome, but I don't think I am. Not anymore. It's difficult to admit this to myself, because I like to think of myself as an *enlightened* person—communing with nature, dancing around the Tree of Life, lighting candles in cathedrals. But I feel like now I've given up entirely. All I feel is my own heaviness, and I can't understand the point anymore; which is maybe the point, circular, there is no *one* point. I started writing hoping to come off as an "enlightened by life experiences" person.

Except that I'm not that person.

I'm some other kind of person.

**THE FIRST DECADE:** Great-Grandma's garden  
and the Joyful Mysteries.

*"Hail, my Mary, full of grace..."*

The beginning, a red cross with a small glass peephole, an image inside of the Immaculate Woman so small it can only be revealed by looking toward the brightest light, tiny fingers for a tiny likeness.

*Mary, Great-Grandma who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name*—to me. I was adopted. My mom and dad called my Great-Grandma, Mary Hrusholovsky to tell her.

"Grandma, we got a little girl!"

My Great-Grandma replied without surprise, “I know. I saw her in heaven and God told me this one was ours.”

The cross, two links, and a bead. Four links, and another bead. Three beads in a row held by only one link apiece. Then, another space, four links, and a bead. A wooden square larger than the beads, a woman on it, hands pressed in prayer, eyes closed, radiating beams from her head in orange and yellow. The woman wears a red dress and a blue veil.

I believe my Great-Grandma did talk to God. Evening was her favorite time of the day. The time of day when everything goes a cool blue-gray, transition time, the sun not quite down, the moon just coming up and so pale it can barely be seen. She said it was, to her, the most peaceful time of day. “The birds are saying their evening prayers,” she would say to my child-mother. To me, she will always be that Immaculate Woman, that woman, peaceful, light, hands gently folded in prayer. I only knew her until I was four, and, as child memories often stay with you no matter how fanciful, I believe she did wear a halo.

*I believe in my Mary, the Great-Grandmother almighty, maker of my childhood heaven and earth...*

I remember she had a beautiful garden, Eden, in her backyard. And in springtime the blooms would open and she would take my small, dirty hand and lead me, like she did my child-mother, through her garden and name each flower, one by one. *This is a peony. This is bridal veil. This is a lilac. This is a rose.* And we would stop at every bloom bead and she would make me look at it, really look at it, and say *see how they are all different? Look at how the petals unfurl in the peony, smell the scent of this pink rose,*

and stopping at each one was like a little prayer. For what, I don't know.

*Hail, my Mary, full of grace and patience, I know the Lord is with thee. And blessed are the flowers in thy garden...*

And then the straight line of beads from the Immaculate Woman diverges, pacing circularly. Four links and then a series of ten consecutive beads. The First Decade's beginning and ending. A pause. Three links. A lone bead. Another pause. Three links. Another series of ten beads. A pause. Three links. Another lone bead. The wooden grain showing through the thin paint stain. Three links. Ten consecutive red beads. Pause for three links of cheap gold colored metal chain. A single bead. Pause, another three links. Ten consecutive beads to follow. Repeat and Repeat and Repeat.

*Hail my Mary, full of love and my innocence. I know you are with me...*

### **THE SECOND DECADE:** Divergence and the Sorrowful Mysteries.

*“Blessed art thou among women, and aborted is the fruit of thy womb...”*

The Rosary is divided into five Decades consisting of ten beads apiece, separated by gaps and a single lone bead. At the ten consecutive beads the Hail Mary is said, in the gaps Glory Be, and at the four lone beads, the Our Father. As you pray your way around a Rosary, the circle brings you back to the woman in the red dress. The wood is soft and pleasing to the fingers as they move over it. The sound of metal on wood is pleasing to the ears, sort of like a light rain

on a window or the soft tinkling of small bells. The feel of the beads running through your fingers gives the sensation of trying to hold water or running sand. The rules to the recitation of the Rosary require one to follow the circle in a clockwise motion. But circles intend images, without intention. Holy God, Holy Mother, Holy Son. But one opts not to choose morbidity. One chooses motion over worn wooden ovals sowing oats for devotion to oneself.

And so I diverged.

*My concepción* was not immaculate.

I chose devotion to myself and opted for abortion. The sickening irony of being adopted and having an abortion never escaped me. I hadn't been to church for years, let alone said a Rosary. I wasn't Catholic anymore, but that old, Catholic guilt found a hole—oh so small—and crept in. I drank a bottle of tequila, took ninety Valium, and tried my hardest to die. When I woke up in the hospital, my mouth still black and bitter from charcoal, I saw my psychiatrist sitting, reading, in the corner. He was wearing a bow tie. He looked up at me and asked, "Well, how are you feeling?"

Once institutionalized, I begged for a priest to come and hear my confession. He chose a more reasonable form of penance. I must recite the Rosary every night before sleep for one year.

A Rosary a day keeps the flames of conscience... or hell... away.

I think I lasted a month.

During each Decade of the Rosary, one is to meditate on the Mysteries, which change depending on what day of the week you are saying your Rosary. There are the Joyful Mysteries, the Luminous Mysteries, The Sorrowful Mysteries, and the Glorious Mysteries.

**THE THIRD DECADE:** Mexico, spilled milk, and the Luminous Mysteries.

*“Holy Mistress, mother of none...”*

A single bead. Pause, another three links. Ten consecutive beads to follow. Repeat and Repeat and Repeat.

In Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico. In my neighbor Luci's kitchen. Luci spoke perfect English, but she promised to help me with my Spanish. I had moved to Mexico after my husband was killed in a car accident.

*“No, no, no. En México we... que usamos como si fuera un collar... we wear our rosaries.”*

“Just like a necklace? Do you match it to your clothes?”

*“No, no, no, no. We wear rosaries as necklaces, pero no para la belleza. Para mostrar la devoción a Dios. Para la buena suerte. In the States, you Católicos, you don't wear your rosaries?”*

“No.”

*“Llevo mi rosario todos los días. Se mantiene la mala suerte a las mil maravillas.”*

“We think it's sacrilegious.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

*“¡Qué pena! My abuelita gave me this rosary. I wear it every day. See? It's worn so smooth. Tócalo. Siéntelo. Sí. I know, if I wear this rosary, nothing bad can happen.”*

In Luci's case, this wasn't so true. After this discussion on the protective mechanisms of the rosary, she broke down and told me her husband had been cheating on her. I doubt she ever really believed anything she had told me, but I guess we hold on.

In the name of the Husband, the Wife, and the Holy Mistress...

I went to her house to borrow some milk. That was all. Milk. She pulled the milk out of *el refri*, and instead of handing it to me she set it gently on the counter. Then she started to cry.

“Oscar has another woman.”

“He’s cheating on you?”

“Yes! A year now. Come. Come and look at this *basura*!”

She grabbed my arm and dragged me up the stairs to her bedroom. Luci had stolen a picture of her husband and his mistress from his dresser while he was away. When he found it missing, they fought over it, tearing it in two, but Luci managed to keep part of it. She led me into her bedroom, opened a drawer in her dresser, pulled out her Bible, opened it, and then pulled out the picture of the *basura*. Mostly all you could see was Oscar, but you could see the girl’s face. She was young. She looked happy.

“How could he do this to his family?” And then Luci started crying again.

*“As a prayer for peace, the Rosary is also, and always has been, a prayer of and for the family. At one time this prayer was particularly dear to Christian families, and it certainly brought them closer together. It is important not to lose this precious inheritance. We need to return to the practice of family prayer and prayer for families...”*—Rosarium Virginis Mariae.

I later found out that Luci’s situation was not uncommon in Mexico. My roommate, Armando, explained it to me this way: “You have your church, your cathedral. It’s the big church. The important and sacred church. But, sometimes, you need to say

some little prayers, and little churches, *capillas*, to say them in.”

The Rosary that does not kill us makes us stronger.

**THE FOURTH DECADE:** Zarco’s  
and the Glorious Mysteries.  
“*Pray for us sinners...*”

Four links and then a series of ten consecutive beads. A pause. Three links. A lone bead. Another pause. Three links. Another series of ten beads. A pause. Three links. Another lone bead.

“What do I say?”

“Don’t say anything.”

“Why? I have to tell him how much I want.”

“You’re a girl. And a *gringa*. Don’t say anything.”

Armando and I walk through the turquoise, stucco fence with the black metal door, through a patio to another door with a black iron barred square in the center. Armando knocks. The square opens.

Armando: *¿Qué onda?*

Guy: *Adelante, guey.*

The square slams, you can hear multiple locks sliding, and the door opens. Armando and I, a very silent, girly, *gringa*, walk into the house that is Zarco’s. There is no actual person named “Zarco.” It’s just the name of the street the house is on.

Guy: *¿Qué onda?*

Armando: *Nada, nada. Nesesito coka, guey.*

Guy: *¿Cuánta?*

I understand most everything they’re saying. I know I hear the guy ask “*¿Quién es la guera, guey?*” Who’s the white girl? As I walk in, the first things I see

are the shrines to the Virgin with candles lit under them. I notice the Guy is wearing a rosary. And the crucifixes. There must have been at least eight. I'm still looking over the room, feeling more like I'm in church than a cocaine bodega when Armando nudges me.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“The money. How much do you want?”

“*Un mil pesos.*”

The Guy went behind the desk, and I kept having a feeling of being in church when I was a little girl. All the candles. All the statues. The silence. The waiting. The hoping.

*“Simple yet profound, it still remains, at the dawn of this third millennium, a prayer of great significance, destined to bring forth a harvest of holiness.”—Rosarium Virginis Mariae Para. 1*

Okay, maybe not a harvest of holiness, but eventually I went to Zarco’s at least once a day. I remember the first time I went during the daytime. I was surprised to realize that my “coke den” was an average house on an average street, right across from an elementary school, a house much like Luci’s house. There were all these old men lined up outside the house, and me. I could go by myself by that time and these little kids all in uniform, wearing their school backpacks, laughing, joking, flirting, would just walk right past our communion line, not stopping to even notice us.

**THE FIFTH DECADE:** The Rosary: A post-modern drug addiction in one act.

“Now, and at the hour of our awakening...”

A full Catholic church in service. Pews facing away from audience. Pews filled. Center stands a Catholic priest holding Eucharist plate. At Rise, Priest raises head and addresses congregation.

(*Chanting*) Oh, holy body, come, come and receive that which will make you whole again, complete again, in love and infinite perfection. Come. Come and receive this most holy offering, from which all energy, all creativity, springs.

Parishioners queue up and begin to walk forward and take lines of coke off the Eucharist plate, each blessed by the priest.

END PLAY.

The sensation of cocaine *beads* running through my body *fingers* gives the feeling of divinity, water or running sand, my thoughts *the beads* falling to the floor. Too much and too much and too much. Repeat and Repeat and Repeat. Pulsing. Erratic. Where was I going in the first place?... dripping with sweat tumbling thoughts... untied shoes, I'm hopping into the back of a moving truck and I've lost a shoe... gardens, peonies...coming home to lay a wreath... fences made of broken bottles... time... time before... time after... death, pain, the heaviness of my own *unenlightened* body.

\*\*\*

The feel of the beads secreting memories endlessly, effortlessly. Memories then engage emotion.

*I did too much. (Cocaine.)*  
*I lost my left shoe in Tequila. (The town.)*

*I bought a new rosary in Mexico City. (From a Mayan.)*

\*\*\*

The beginning, a red cross with a small glass peephole, and an image inside of the Immaculate Woman so small it can only be revealed by looking toward the brightest light, tiny fingers for a tiny likeness. Circularity brings you back.

My Great-Grandmother said, without surprise, “*I know. I saw her in heaven and God told me this one was ours.*”

\*\*\*

Except I’m not that person.  
I’m some other kind of person.  
Amen.

# **CLARK E. CLARK**

## **what men talk about when they talk about me**

### **RANSOMED HEART PODCAST:**

“Hi. I’m John Eldredge. A number of years ago, I wrote *Wild at Heart*, about the healing of the masculine soul and God took that book and did the most breathtaking thing imaginable. He used it to rescue millions of men all over the world; marriages were saved, churches, jobs, and kingdoms! *Wild at Heart* has now sold over three million copies. It is one of the great untold stories of Christendom and I love it that way. I am done with the goofy, wacky, far out, wispy, girly-ghost, hyper-religious views of Jesus. I am done. We need the REAL Jesus like we need oxygen and I want a revolution for Him. To have His life, His joy, His love—to know Him! It is the greatest treasure in all the world. You *can* get answers to the riddle of the Earth, but you **CANNOT** get them through the gospel of Churchianity. ‘Please,’ Jesus says, ‘follow my voice and I will lead you to life.’ It’s huge. Listen. **LISTEN.** **LISTEN!**”

**AVALANCHE HALL, CROOKED CREEK RANCH,  
FRASER, COLORADO, March 2010:**

“Do you feel that? That feeling you’re feeling right now after watching those movie clips? *Black Hawk Down*. *The Eagle*. *Star Trek*. That’s who you were meant to be and that’s why those stories are the smelling salts for your soul. Men long for adventures and battles and beauty—and God made them that

way. In this late stage of Western Culture, we've lost our awareness of gender. God didn't create people. *Male and female* He created them. Welcome to the *Wild at Heart* Boot Camp! The next four days will not be about the seven steps to becoming a better Christian. We're not going to get into little groups and have help sessions. We are going to take a Soul Safari and for those of you who think, 'This isn't for me,' it is for you. We are going to drop that men's retreat macho, posing, BS, fig-leaf stuff. You are going to be who you are! We are going to go deep and be real and watch this scene from *Braveheart*. In William Wallace, we see a portrait of Jesus. Jesus is a fight-picking Juggernaut and you would know this if you just looked at little boys. Snowball fights are essential! Right? Right?

"But the Church has emasculated Jesus, made him into Mr. Rogers. *It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood?* Come on! It's a war out there!"

"And then when Christianity asks, 'You want an adventure, a battle, a beauty?' And you answer 'Yes,' because you do want those things—every man wants those things—the church says, 'Be an usher.' That's it!? Let's do a little exercise. What are your favorite movies?"

"*Tombstone!*"

"And why?"

"Wyatt Earp protected the people!"

"*Lord of the Rings!* I want to be Gandalf!"

"Good. Do you hear what you're saying? Now, let's go eat some dinner!"

#### BULL MOOSE LODGE:

"Pass the bread?"

"I'm Darwin, no relation to evolution. I do advertising in Salt Lake."

“Real Estate. I just sold three fitness centers near Atlanta.”

“Banker.”

“Banker.”

“Banker.”

“Banker. We’re all four of us from Lubbock, Texas.”

“My wife gave me Boot Camp for Christmas.”

“More than three-quarters of us are first-timers and more than half came alone. We’re the lucky ones. Thousands of guys applied. There’s a guy from Scotland here. Australia and Argentina and Germany and England, too. Me? I’m from Saskatchewan.”

“Before my first Boot Camp—this is my sixth—I’d read all of John’s books and led a *Wild at Heart* book study.”

“I can’t believe how deep we’ve gone after only one session!”

“Yeah, the peas *are* good.”

“All this for less than \$500!”

“Men? Guys? Brothers?”

“Yeah!”

“We’re so glad the enemy didn’t stop you from coming! In your packet, you’ll find dog tags and earplugs and a list of resource materials and a *Wild at Heart* Boot Camp journal. No alcohol or drugs at the Ranch. No cameras. If you need to make a last call, do so tonight. No email. While you’re here, you’re outside the matrix. Also: there’s a place to rent snowmobiles and there’s a place to go tubing. Snowshoes are available for ten dollars. The hot tub is on. The snack bar is open and so is the coffee hut. The ammunition boxes are like piggy banks for your prayers. Deposit a prayer slip and our prayer team will pray for you. Cigars are five dollars. You’ll notice the Ran-

somed Heart resources in the corner: DVDs, CDs, Field Guides, books and broadswords. You can get *The Platinum Collection* before it's in stores for \$99! *Epic*. *A Battle to Fight*. *Finding Freedom*. *Love and War*. *The Utter Relief of Holiness*. *The Life of Jesus*. *The Good Heart*. *Walking with God*. *The Hope of Prayer*. *Developing a Conversational Intimacy with God*. For orders over \$150 we'll ship to you for free."

#### CANYONS DORM:

"Say you're on an airplane and the flight attendant gives you a parachute and doesn't tell you why. She just says, 'Put this on,' and you do, but none of the other passengers listen. They think it looks stupid, and at first maybe the straps are tight and maybe it is heavy and then you spill coffee on it. Everyone laughs. You feel vulnerable so you take it off. A few minutes later, below you, a hole opens in the plane and you're staring through thirty-five thousand feet of air at a white-capped ocean that looks like a field of rocks. You have to make things believable. God is the greatest parachute the world has ever known. What's your contact info? O man. O man. It's so good to talk to people, to share and go so deep! You look longer than your bunk. I'm turning out the lights. Are you even comfortable?"

#### BULL MOOSE:

"Men snore. They have phlegm and they pass gas. They take showers at midnight and use the toilet every twenty minutes. (I know, pancakes, bacon, eggs! It's like we all died last night and woke up in heaven!) Did you use your earplugs? They may muffle a room, but they louden up everything inside me. Last night was like listening to a tape recording of

myself. Driving long haul truck is a good way to get to know all the voices inside you, but this—this talking was like the horns and sirens and Jake brakes of an I-90 wreck. There are no signs or orange cones or lane lines in your brain. No cops directing traffic. No headlights. Think about the darkness in your skull. But then close your eyes, and seasons and places, familiar faces, faces you've never known, and sometimes things you wish you'd done better, or hadn't done at all—they all light up. What? You couldn't find the off switch either? What? I can't really hear you with all the other talking. What?"

#### AVALANCHE:

"Each one of us, as we pray, pray in the first person because this isn't about the generic 'we.' This is about you. This is me. This is ME. Jesus. I. give. my. self. to. you. I give to you my body. I give to you my heart. I give you, Jesus, my will. My mind and my thoughts. Cover me with your blood. Come. Speak to me, Jesus. Speak Jesus. Speak. Amen?"

"Amen!"

"Good. Hearing His voice, you know He's got a hysterical side! Years ago, I was so beat up from work that I nearly bailed on this hike I'd been planning for months with my three sons. But Jesus said to me, 'Go,' and so we went. Immediately we started seeing moose sign. I love moose. 'Jesus,' I said. 'It'd be great if we saw a moose.' And Jesus said, 'You will.' And I'm like, 'That was easy.' One second. Two seconds. Three seconds later: cue moose. He's hysterical. But you have to listen. Before an event like this, the Ransomed Heart Team asks Jesus for advance warning about who is leading the enemy's army against us. This weekend, Jesus says the strongmen will be fear,

disqualification, self-destruction, diminishment, deafness, unbelief, and some sort of hidden thing—a panther or a mountain lion in the darkness. Two nights ago, Stasi, my wife, and I are watching a movie—a funny comedy. We've got the popcorn and the blanket on the couch, cuddling, you know? And then this gal in the movie—she's a bombshell—wham! Frontal nudity! If I hadn't turned off the DVD, the enemy could have said, 'You're not qualified to lead Boot Camp.'"

**BEAR CLAW:**

"You've seen men flip through women's magazines. You've seen them with a tractor tire under their button-down, or buying thirty cans of beer at a time. You think they're happy? They're looking for God. I once saw a shot glass shatter a mirror. This man comes careening into a restaurant, a brunette under one arm and a blond under the other. The barman overflowed glasses for them and then the girls started dancing and the man got quiet and heavy on his elbows. You know why he threw that glass? It was what he saw in the mirror. A man without God is no man at all and in the mirror, this guy didn't see himself, you see. What he saw was nothing."

**AVALANCHE:**

"A Covenant of Silence is forty-five minutes for you to listen to and talk with God."

**COVENANT OF SILENCE:**

### CANYONS' STEPS:

“You hear that? That’s the snow settling. Snow seems quiet but it’s noisy if you listen. It can click across ice. Or it blows different from an empty breeze. This is my seeing-eye dog, Roxy. Without sight, you learn that you can hear a man’s history in his walk or stumble or run. In the pause between sentences you can hear and understand why. The movement of atoms. War making. Cars. Crows. Everything speaks. There are messages meant only for you and that you need for survival.”

### HOT TUB:

“You cannot be invisible and expect people to see you. Period. And you can’t say nothing and expect people to hear you. Period, though it’s amazing what people will try, hiding out from the real world of real responsibility and real reality. Just letting things whiz past. The world is literally breaking. I do bone trauma in Montgomery and I’ve seen splintered feet, ribs, faces, jaws, skulls, cheeks, knees, and wrists and it’s all because of bullets. Segregation ended decades ago and they still act entitled. What? You don’t think so? I tell you, we need more jails, not blank checks. Space travel was another terrible investment. What do we want to land on an asteroid for anyway?”

### AVALANCHE:

“Eleven full-time employees. A pledge to keep things small. A \$3.4 million dollar budget funded by donors and resource sales. That’s the boring stuff. Ransomed Heart came out of our journeys as men and our inability to take today’s Christianity. I’d published *Sacred Romance* with my closest friend, Brent, in 1997 and we dreamed of launching something like

this. That first men's retreat weekend, in 1998, Brent was leading a rock-climbing trip. When the ledge he was standing on gave way, he fell eighty feet. His death was, obviously, devastating. Brent had been my mentor in Colorado Springs and a father to many. All of his clients, the rest of the office, they looked to me. 'John, you're our man,' they kept saying. I remember sitting in my car and saying to Jesus, 'You gotta tell me what to do. I don't know what to do.' Sometimes when you ask God a question, He asks you a question back, right? 'If you did not *need* to prove that you are a good man,' God said to me, 'would you do this?' And I said, 'No,' and He said, 'John, you're pretty good at counseling, but I want you to talk with more people.' We did the first Boot Camp out of the trunks of our cars. We had 350 spots and we received exactly 350 checks in the mail. There is a life out of which everything flows. We're not building an empire. We do four of these a year for men, a couple for women. We've begun giving scholarships to Samoans. We've turned down offers for TV and radio because God said we should use our armies instead."

#### BULL MOOSE:

"We could use some more taco meat."

"Is that *The Last of the Mohicans* soundtrack?"

"Did you read John's blog about how gas station burritos are like the gospel?"

"Like during those forty-five minutes of silence, I thought for a second maybe God was talking, but I wasn't sure. How do you know God's talking to you or if you're just talking to yourself?"

"How deep do you think we can go this weekend?"

"Could we please have some more taco meat, please?"

### AVALANCHE:

“It’s a valid question. Your physicality wasn’t made in God’s image; your heart was. And don’t you just LOVE God! Sex is in the center of the Bible for a reason. I kiss this book! O my goodness, I want to climb the palm! To pick the fruit! The legs. The waist. O, Eve! I HATE Valentine’s Day. The PRESSURE. ‘On February 14th, you will be the man?’ Please! A REAL man is THE man every day. And when Eve sees that you are, she will seduce you because a woman is at her best when she is being a woman. Follow me closely here guys and you will have a phenomenal sexual life! Read *Captivating*. Who does Satan go after in the Garden? He doesn’t go after Adam, the warrior king. Heads up. Think about that. Still, what did Adam do when Eve took the apple? He did squat! He stood there! He acquiesced his masculinity by choosing Eve over God! And if you don’t believe that we worship at the altar of Eve, look around you. Why do you think pornography is the most addictive thing on the planet?”

### A WALK:

“Mind if I smoke? I’ve quit before, but then my girlfriend split with me. She could cook lentils, man. *Lentils*. One bowl and you could drift dive the currents for days. At a depth of sixty feet, your tank holds air for an hour. Yellow sharks have twin dorsal fins. I’ve read Buddha and Krishna and Lao Tzu, but they’re dead, dead, dead, all those Gods are dead. Jesus truly is a living God. He walked to India! Hostels have His name in their guest books. What would I ask Him if I could ask Him one thing—it’s not that simple. You know, there are answerable questions and there are unanswerable questions and

the unanswerable kind's the kind for Rich. What do you mean, who's Rich? Rich is me."

#### AVALANCHE:

"It's like adult grizzlies showing an age-old path to their young. After the Cowboy of adolescence and the King of middle age, the final stage of the Masculine Journey is that of the Sage, the white-haired man of wisdom and, guys, let me tell you: it isn't supposed to be this way, but there is a DRAMATIC shortage of sages out there. You've got to find bits of wisdom from everywhere: teachers, authors, scripture and songs. A sage will lead you to a question."

#### PORCH:

"What do you mean who? The Chinks, of course. The Chiney-men, the locals. When I was stationed off Hong Kong, they cleaned our bilges and painted our hulls. They could do anything with bamboo. We paid them with a place at the end of our mess line and they said nothing. The silent type's not to be trusted, my dad always said. And that's how I felt about God until He found me in California remodeling SuperCuts. I'm kneeling in a corner, vacking thirty years' worth of locks and curls when God says to me, 'Gary,' like that. 'You like the Dodgers?' We talked baseball for fifteen minutes before He tells me to turn off the Shop-Vac already and listen. 'Gary,' He says. 'I'm so glad you've figured out your role in the Story.' There isn't nothing like a pat on the back from the Almighty."

#### AVALANCHE:

"Story is the nature of reality and the enemy has stolen yours. Our lives are like movies we've arrived at forty minutes late. We're like, 'What? Huh?'"

A WALK:

“You and your woman’s hair whipping as you roar over a mountain going a hundred miles an hour screaming monkey-faced drunk and a shit-eating grin so big you’re crying. The bike I still have. The hair I’ve mostly lost. Owning your story is like growing roots to the center of the Earth. Then you *can* be vulnerable. If you don’t own your story and you don’t tell your story, you’ll end up like driftwood—floating easily for a while, but taking on water and insects and algae all colors until your softer grains peel away and all that’s left of you is a—what do you call it? Hard and twisted, rotting deep at the bottom of some shit-polluted ocean.”

CANYONS:

“What are you reading? Nietzsche? Never heard of it.”

AVALANCHE:

“Understanding is highly overrated! It does not equal restoration or healing, and yet, we men do love the mind. Think about it: how many great woman generals are there? How many chess champions? Or Einsteins? Rack your brains all you like, but who you are isn’t in that skull of yours. It’s here; it’s in your heart. Your role in The Story was written on your heart by God, and the greatest thing is that it is actually what. you. most. want. to. do. Don’t ask *how* to be you. Just do. *How* is God’s department and He can make sense out of anything.”

AVALANCHE:

“Right? When the screen comes down, you can stand, sit, raise your hands, sing or not, but the one

thing you CANNOT be is passive. Now, let's. worship. God!"

He has fire in His eyes and a sword in His hand  
And He's riding a white horse across this land  
And He's calling out to you and me  
*'Will you ride with me?'*

We say, 'yes Lord, we will ride with You'

AVALANCHE:

"To recap: part of becoming a man is being told that you are a man by a man who has already been validated as a man. You are a man. You are a man. You are a man."

AVALANCHE:

"To recap: Jesus wasn't Gandhi and the devil is not just some guy in red tights."

AVALANCHE:

"To recap: the false self will cling to you like an octopus!"

CANYONS:

"You can't rest here! You can't rest now! How are you going to go deep if you're in bed with Neat-See!? Time's running out! Come on! Come on! Let's go lift weights!"

A RUN:

### DIE FRÖHLICHE WISSENSCHAFT:

“Whatever in nature and in history is of my own kind, speaks to me, spurs me on, and comforts me; the rest I do not hear, or forget right away. We are always only in our own company.”

### CANYONS:

“I went to the beach to be alone with God and to be serious about it. I was leaning against a piece of driftwood when along comes a yellow lab, cutest thing. He’s licking and nudging me. But there aren’t supposed to be dogs on this section of beach. I’m really mad. This is supposed to be my uninterrupted time with God. Finally, the lab stops licking me—maybe I even kicked him away, and I go back to *my* serious praying: me and God, *mano a mano*. But I can’t concentrate. The dog is jumping and biting and playing in the waves and I start crying because all of a sudden I can hear God saying, ‘Loosen up. Live a little.’”

### FIRE PIT:

“I arrived here the world’s greatest poser. I was a sex addict. I watched so much porn and had affairs on top of affairs, but this weekend I’ve forgiven those who harmed me and I’ve forgiven myself.”

“I keep expecting to see men floating by on balloons.”

“There’s nothing like smoking cigars with a bunch of men!”

“But will we ever be able to go this deep again?”

“My father died when I was 17 and he beat me until I was 16 because I wet the bed. I could amaze all of you with my knowledge of theology, but none of it means anything. I’m filled with a love for you guys

that I don't know how to express. Look at me. I'm crying. I'm 61 years old and I'm nothing but a big baby."

"It's safe by the fire, brother. Surrounded by MEN! By WARRIORS!"

"Satan wouldn't dare show his face here."

"He couldn't hide, either. We'd sniff out an imposter, easy."

#### AVALANCHE:

"This morning, before our amazing French toast breakfast, I asked Jesus, 'What are your parting words for us?' 'One,' He said, 'I am so proud of you.' And, 'Two, all of this is real. All of this is true.' And then 'Three,' He said, 'I am going home with you.' Hang on, men. Hang on to this weekend. If it gets thick at home, take it as a compliment. You're not blowing it. The enemy fears you. How many guys who love God know that they are part of a Navy SEAL squad in battle? In this final chilling scene, my favorite scene, from *Braveheart*, William Wallace is tortured, crucified, in front of a mob."

"Freedom!"

"The shuttle leaves at noon. Bag lunches are in Bull Moose; take an extra apple for the road, if you want. And if you're ready to go even deeper, sign up for an Advanced weekend."

#### BULL MOOSE:

"Beards don't make men, man. That's what the enemy wants you to think. Wounds, man! Wounds make men! And we've all got 'em. Do I sound crazy to you, because you sound crazy to me! You can't really believe what you're saying! Of course you think your father's a coward! Of course you think your mother loved you too much! Who cares that you've

never been in a fistfight or killed something with a gun? It's not important that you don't change your own oil. That you vote Democrat. That there's misery and that you don't think you've lived enough of a *real* bloody deceitful alcoholic tear-jerking wound-worthy trauma! What's important is that YOU stop running and that YOU do what Spicoli does in that movie, *Fast Times*—want my apple? I don't really like red delicious. But so, you know, Spicoli, he sees a killer wave and he angles to it on his surfboard and he's like, 'Hey bud, let's party.'"

# **COLIN DODDS**

## **high noon on the 10**

All the ripeness of the vast agricultural basins  
has been funneled into the shapely hips of a woman  
crossing the parking lot before me with an iced coffee  
drink

On the lawn of the foothills college,  
the unwashed man with his legs crossed  
isn't meditating, but repairing a sprinkler head

The coastlines and the mountains—  
all that matters tells of calamities,  
commemorates and foretells our last selves, says  
There were men like you when the earth opened up

## famous traffic

The sun blasts the thoughts from my head  
The never-ending, never-starting traffic on the 405  
tramples the imagination of the hillsides

Night lands squarely  
An ambulance torments the darkness  
half-hurrying to a dimestore disaster  
of stranger-on-stranger violence

and I race down western Sunset Boulevard,  
like a long, winding intestine  
to where the sea looms, huge and useless

## the late coast

Always on the borders  
of land and ocean, of chaos and order  
The quarreling multitudes gather  
saying to all of possibility Rather and Rather

The ancient restaurant with odd hours  
The sunlight in the apartment courtyard  
The overheard conversations that reassure you that  
    you are not alone and you are not making this up  
The desiccated blondes of California and Arizona  
The benevolent elderly who nod and move their cars

The homeless man jogging  
The labor in and against the sun  
The paranoid, beautiful women who glide across  
    restaurant floors like centurions in the army of  
    sex

The minotaur at the center of the parking structure  
The brown walls and turquoise booths of the diners

The hopeful hearsay of the eleven dimensions  
The uniqueness of every real psychosis  
The tranquil valley of consciousness  
The strange electric symbols in the old cell phone  
The things lonely people say to strangers

The whole world comes here  
to be where the rents are high, the sun is famous  
and the homeless hold court

The whole world comes here  
to hear the wild, doomed fruition of a thousand gen-  
    erations  
in the way one wild, doomed man growls the word  
“freeway” from the jukebox, for the millionth time,  
forty years after his last bender

The whole world comes here  
to see where the story of the world ends

# **JOHN PALEN**

## **beyond the tipping point**

the summer it was no longer possible  
to deny what we had done

the roses were particularly beautiful  
everyone said so  
the mornings bright and calm  
the nights starry

and parents and grandparents  
came unmoored from long marriages  
and dated and went steady like adolescents  
and broke up and went steady again

writing love notes in pencil on lined paper  
and doodling arabesques and spider webs in the mar-  
gins  
folding and unfolding and refolding the sheets  
to read them over and over.

JOHN PALEN ~199~

## prayer flags

Unaccountably they lift my spirits,  
these plastic grocery bags the color of old teeth  
I see along the Interstate south of Chicago:  
caught in fence wire, blown to tatters  
by the patient prairie wind

thirteen thousand miles  
from mountains where Tibetan flags  
blue, white, red, green and yellow,  
shake blessing on the world.

# **FREDERICK POLLACK**

## **been there done that**

That bird flying northwest isn't  
one of the geese who, returning,  
used to live at the reservoir  
and delight people when,  
past the fence, lines of goslings  
followed their mothers, or upset people  
when goslings strayed  
under the fence, or disgust people  
with their poop. Either they wanted  
a change, or the new radar  
and missiles beyond the reservoir  
bothered them. Now they stay  
along the canal or Potomac,  
where herons pose on one leg  
and turtles on logs for as long,  
apparently, as it took them  
to evolve, or until the Greenland  
ice sheet slips off  
and drowns them. That bird  
is a heron, elegant and silent,  
its head and neck the shape of the failed Concorde.

In fall I gain IQ points.  
In spring I lose them, but used to regain  
and now at least remember  
as much of the body  
as I used. And partial, sketchy  
images, not of the past  
but what things in the past  
represented. It's a distinction  
I must insist on. Otherwise  
I risk accepting  
spring, and that spring isn't mine,  
and death, the soft focus  
and general second-rateness  
of things. Rather the way Lenin  
said he couldn't listen  
(couldn't "afford," actually, to listen)  
to Beethoven, for it made him want  
to say nice things to people,  
make them smile, pat their shoulders  
with awkward, accommodating gestures.

## **no deposit, no return**

A Private has mocked reincarnation.  
A mob, with the warmth and closeness  
of mobs, chases him through the city.  
But this occurs in colonial times,  
and the Private takes refuge  
at regimental headquarters.  
"You've caused a spot of bother,"  
says the colonel, who had expected

a grim, aging missionary  
of his own monotheism  
with its unrepeated soul.

But this is a lad, a smiling scapegrace  
who says, insincerely, “I’m sorry, sir.”  
“I presume you told them about Grace,  
Salvation, and the Moral Law,”  
intones the colonel.

“How everything is rewarded in the next life  
and balances in this.”

“Actually no,” says the youth.

“I don’t think one has the right  
to speak for the dead or suffering,  
to excuse their pain.” “Then,” says the colonel  
briskly, “I suppose you said  
there are only atoms; that death is a sleep  
like the one that preceded us.”

“I’m afraid not. Given endless  
time and recombination, that  
conclusion too seems unwarranted.”

“Well then, my God, man, what did you say  
to upset them so?” cries the colonel.

“I agreed with them, sir. With a cavil:  
something essentially ourselves  
is born again and again  
in other parts of the universe, and in other  
universes. And in none of them  
do we look like this,  
or breathe this air, or feel anything  
that we feel, or share  
any of these concerns.”

## comfort

At a certain moment happiness is achieved and the next stage begins: inviting the dead, in the form they had when living, though new and improved, to check out the scene. Most join. Some say they'll wait for Jesus. A few have issues around the issue of *boredom*, and changes to the brain that remove it while supposedly safeguarding brains. I'm one of those.

No problem, says happiness, setting off in a gaudy, gigantic, improbable craft for parties in other dimensions. Take your time—what else is it for? I'll be back.

I hope that, while we wait and make up our minds, you'll stay with me, listening with our old brains for years of weekends to our young bodies. How they missed us, how much they have to say!

Though I wonder whether I'll soon be as stupid as I was at twenty. And if you'll still want me. A place near a tamed and cleaned-up ocean will help—you love the water, I can forego mountains. And our cats, all our cats, running freely and safely at last after rodents, delicious, bloody, and visible only to them.

## screen memory

Something about this prewar foyer  
pleases. The mailboxes  
were added later, crudely, but  
the credenza  
where letters were once laid stands  
and is polished. Two iron sculptures hedge  
its surface: a fencer; a shepherdess.  
The sconces, with  
their confidential glow,  
suggest a synthesis of throne-room  
and chapel. Nearer  
the entrance,  
where tile gives way to carpet, vast  
tufted armchairs  
attended by lamps  
appear to define a zone  
where people might actually gather.  
Yet this theme of nostalgia, of absence,  
is secondary  
as I pull back the inner door,  
open the heavy outer door  
of the elevator,  
and pause here.  
The apartments were subdivided, more  
than once, but remain  
splendid. The meeting, whatever it was, was  
unfortunate, but what  
of that.  
Youth is gone, but night awaits.  
I'm not sure what I want,  
only that I will impose it on the world.

# **BILL WOLAK**

from *The Office of Unfamiliar Carnal Pleasures*  
**the judges of the inquisition**

The judges of the Inquisition  
remained cautious  
throughout the proceedings  
against the helpless women  
whom they condemned.  
Before each witch would appear  
her head, pubis, eyebrows,  
and eyelashes were shaved off,  
and as a special precaution,  
she was led naked into the courtroom  
walking backwards so that her eyes  
would never have the chance  
to cast a spell on any judge.

## **a menacing omen from the provinces of assyria**

From the provinces a menacing omen  
has been newly reported.

They say a cow gave birth to a lion,  
a disastrous prediction for King Esarhaddan.  
Luckily the diviners and astrologers,  
who protect the king from disturbing news,  
handled the problem tactfully.

They ordered the lion, the cow, the farmer,  
and the scribe who wrote the warning  
killed and buried in the same grave.

## **cuchulainn's greeting**

When Cuchulainn arrived  
at the court of the Queen of Ulster,  
she and all of the ladies of the court—  
numbering no less than six hundred and ten—  
raised their skirts over their heads  
exposing their naked genitals  
to honor the famous warrior.

## **the monk's desire**

Cardinal Jacques de Vitry  
relates the strange story  
of a monk who was so in love  
with a woman that his obsession  
for her persisted and intensified  
even after her death.

As a last resort to cure himself,  
the monk dug up her decaying corpse  
and forced himself to witness  
the full horror of her decaying body,  
her maggot-filled eyes,  
and the stench of her putrefying flesh.  
Only after experiencing the disgust  
of that odor was he able  
to control his desire.

## **ammon of the desert**

Even as a celibate monk living  
south of Alexandria near Mount Nitria,  
Ammon sensed temptation all around him.  
He resolved, therefore, never to undress  
for any reason as long as he lived.  
“It is scandalous,” he maintained,  
“to glimpse even one’s own body  
exposed by daylight.”

# **BOB MESZAROS**

## **no night school**

The desks are straight, each row an arm's length from another. I wash the chalk dust from the coal-black board, and sponge its dust-filled ledge, emptying the stainless steel bucket in the bathroom's iron sink.

The third floor corridor is motionless and empty; the custodians are leaving, their wooden push brooms rap against the stairwell's concrete steps and red brick walls—echoing, descending.

Inside my room, tomorrow's fixed and ready: the lights are out; the door is shut; the shades are drawn and even. Each desk is set in place, and waiting.

There will be no night school here, no second thoughts, no sleepless rearranging.

## clapping the erasers

Waiting, her back turned to the class,  
her right arm raised, she presses the white  
chalk hard against the coal-black board.  
The twenty-four of us sit silenced.

Through the half-sleep of school-room quiet,  
I watch the muscles in her long legs tighten,  
chalk dust pouring from her small white hand.

She slips into a shaft of late day sunlight;  
the wall of fractions and percentiles brightens,  
her silver bracelet catches blinding fire.

In the fifth row last seat, by the window,  
my body hardens into adolescence;  
I grip the wooden desk top with both hands.

She turns and looks—a question.  
The tiny silver earrings circle, soundless;  
The blond hair ripples in the late day sun.

She frowns and shakes her head—she's waiting.  
All hands are raised, again, but mine.

Later, the white chalk snaps, the blond hair  
curls and tightens into knots. An angry ghost,  
I pound her name across the courtyard wall.  
Not even the rain will wash the red brick clean.

## reading thoreau at walden pond

Here, at Walden Pond, through  
winter ice with rock and cord he plumbed  
the water's depth. In spring, he stepped  
a widening arc around his cabin door  
to watch the raptors parceling out the sky.  
Each day he surveyed—mapped and measured—  
one with water, land, and air.

Miles from here, my son is one  
with feeding tubes and wires. Still as stone  
he lies. Each afternoon from one to four  
I sit in silence in an off-white room, waiting  
for an eye to open, a hand to move.  
There time is a slow-drip IV, emptying;  
sunlight seeping beneath a shade.

In *The Maine Woods* Thoreau knew fear—  
no plumbed and measured pond  
and woods, no passing train to mark  
the time of day. A ghost abandoned  
on a pile of stone, he lived a mountain  
larger than his soul.

All morning long I read Thoreau  
at Walden Pond. The day is clear; the water still—  
an eye in which I watch the raptors  
parceling out the sky,  
while in a small white room in Boston,  
the afternoon waits—silent, and sudden as Katahdin.

# **MARIA BRANDT**

## **the next thing**

After Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast*.

CHARACTERS: Josephine, fifties. Anthony, fifties.

*Josephine towel-dries two fragile cups and saucers in an apartment in Brooklyn in the 1950s. Anthony is off-stage, shaving in the bathroom, with the door open.*

ANTHONY

You having an egg? Then I'll have an egg.

*Josephine sets down the cups and cracks an egg into a bowl. NOTE: Throughout the play, Anthony might hum or even sing, at intervals.*

ANTHONY

I like my eggs. You make a good egg Josephine. You've always made a good egg. Anthony always loved your eggs, too. He used to tell me he loved when you fried your eggs and when you scrambled them, you make a good scrambled egg Josephine, and when you made those frittatas on Sundays. Anthony always loved your eggs. Still loves your eggs, I'm sure, if he'd ever come and visit. Ungrateful son of a bitch.

*Josephine adds salt and/or pepper and/or milk and whisks the egg.*

ANTHONY

Leaving to work for Mr. Garpone. Mr. Garpone! Ow!

*Anthony has cut himself.*

ANTHONY

Goddamn son of a bitch, cut myself again. Josephine, get me a napkin?

*Josephine gets a napkin and gives it to Anthony, who is still in the bathroom.*

ANTHONY

Thanks.

*She crosses back to the egg and continues whisking, by rote.*

ANTHONY

You look good today. You always look good in the morning. Not like when you were twenty, but good. So what are you doing today? You going to the dress-maker? Do a little work for her? Or you going to your mother's? She'll complain to you about me again you know. "That Anthony," she'll say. "That Anthony, he's the reason your boy left." What does she know, the fat cow. Can't even speak English. Got off the boat two years ago and can't even speak English. She'll say all that in Italiano. What does she know. It's 1953. Brooklyn's gonna win the pennant. And she's speaking Italiano complaining about me. Ha! She should be complaining about Mr. Garpone. Mr. Garpone

who steals her grandson and ships him out to Commack to pour concrete when he could be here with us. Next thing you know she'll be baking pignoli cookies for Mr. Garpone and praying novenas.

*Josephine sets the cups into the saucers and pours coffee from a pot into one of the cups, then stands still.*

ANTHONY

Praying her novenas for Mr. Garpone and his silk ties and concrete. Like concrete is so important, not like the Dodgers, not like his mama and papa, ungrateful son of a bitch, what's he doing in Commack?

*Josephine still holds the coffee pot. She's trying to make a decision.*

ANTHONY

I noticed Mr. Garpone was here the other day. You didn't think I noticed, did you. What was he doing here? All dressed in his suit and shoes. Dropping off a letter from Anthony? Kid won't even buy his own postage? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you show me the letter? I saw the fancy dishes in the drying rack, the burnt candles, I know what's going on. And I found the letters in your drawer too Josephine. You don't think I know about all those letters from Anthony?

*Josephine sets down the pot, opens a drawer, and removes a small pile of letters. She bundles these neatly and places them in her purse.*

ANTHONY

You don't think I know what he says in all those letters? Next thing you know Mr. Garpone will be teaching Anthony Italian and he'll be eating Sunday dinner at your mother's instead of here.

*Josephine puts the clean cup and saucer away. She removes a small roll of cash from her breast, neatly tied with string, hesitates, then places this in her purse as well. She stands perfectly still. By now, Anthony has released his anger and is spent.*

ANTHONY

That egg almost done? You make a good egg, Josephine, doll.

*She makes the sign of the cross and exits.*

ANTHONY

Next thing you know, it'll be just you and me eating our eggs, God save our souls, the Dodgers will win the pennant and then the series, and your mother will be with your pops, a real gentleman he was, your pops, not like Mr. Garpone.

*He moans, a deep sadness.*

ANTHONY

Ah, Josephine, just you and me, just like the old days...

*Pause. The bathroom door opens and we can see Anthony's hand or perhaps his whole body, maybe even backlit by the*

*bathroom light. He should seem very alone.*

ANTHONY

Josephine?

*Silence. Lights fade to black.*

# **PAUL DICKEY**

## **who says you can't go home again**

**CHARACTERS:** Four actors: two male, LARSON and JOHN; and two female, TINA and DEBBIE. A DIRECTOR, who does not appear onstage.

**SETTING:** Two simple settings are required—two similar kitchens with table and two chairs in each. Preferably there will be separate lighting or some device to visually separate the settings for the audience.

**OPENING:** *LARSON enters one kitchen by the back door. He closes the door quietly and looks around the kitchen.*

**LARSON**  
(to himself)

Nothing disturbed. Clearly a good sign. With Tina though, you never know.

*He smiles and opens a cabinet door to find a box of cereal. He methodically gets out a saucer, a spoon, sugar and milk, and prepares the cereal. He puts the milk back in the refrigerator but does not put away the sugar. He sits down at the kitchen table and sighs.*

LARSON

Home. (pause) It does feel good.

*He casually eats the cereal slowly, clearly relishing the experience.*

LARSON

Now, when Tina comes down, I am going to...

*His voice becomes inaudible. Someone is walking upstairs.*

LARSON

Maybe I should... Naw, she'll be down soon enough. Let me enjoy it here. My own kitchen. (chuckling) When she gets here, I won't get a minute's peace anymore. You know women.

*A toilet flushes upstairs. A faucet is turned on and off.*

LARSON

But this time, make no mistake, I am going to tell her. Make it right. Do it right. I love her. I missed her. She has to know that. I'm going to tell her first off.

*We hear footsteps coming down the stairs.*

LARSON

It's her. (pause) Okay, I'm ready. Here goes. Wish me luck.

*TINA appears on other side of kitchen. She is startled.*

LARSON

Tina! I'm home. For good.

TINA

Fifteen months, Larson! Fifteen months!

LARSON

Days, Tina. Fifteen days.

TINA

I'm not saying I'm calling the cops on you. But at least be accurate. I'm just saying... (pause) *oh, my gosh, John!*... Larson, I'm just saying...

LARSON

John? Like at work John? (pause, pleading) It was only days, Tina.

TINA

Days? In your head, mister. Yeah. Now get out of here. Before "Work John" gets home.

LARSON

You said "Till death..."

TINA

Do you hear me? We are not having this conversation. I don't want to have to explain any of *this* to John!

*The kitchen phone rings. LARSON gets up and starts to leave. TINA answers the phone. LARSON almost exits.*

TINA

Virginia? Thomas? Is that you?

*Pause. LARSON stops dead in his tracks.*

TINA

Larson, are you *crazy?* (pause) It's your mother. Your dad has something he wants to say to you.

*TINA drops the phone, disgusted. It hangs from the cord. LARSON comes back and picks it up. Lights out. A spotlight comes up on Tina's side of the stage.*

TINA:

*(laughing, self-satisfied)*

End of play.

DIRECTOR (OFFSTAGE)

Ms. Williams, are you kidding me? This two minute crap won't do here. This is *The Skullduggery Theatre*. We do drama. This is a mere freaking *joke* and half the audience won't even get it! Hell, half of your actors don't get it.

DIRECTOR (OFFSTAGE)

A play must be more than a joke. And it has to be longer. We spent good money on the set alone. Two of the actors aren't even on stage yet. Give them a break, will you? They got all dressed up to do this bit. Can we make it go at least ten minutes? You think? For the love of Pete...

*Voice trails off. Spotlight goes off. Lights come back up on stage. LARSON and TINA are in place.*

LARSON

Mom? Dad? Can I give you a ring back? It is a bit awkward here at the moment.

*LARSON hangs the phone back on the wall.*

TINA

*A bit awkward?* No, Larson, you just get yourself out of here and there won't be anything awkward. You are. You have always been and obviously you are still *awkward*.

LARSON

Tina, I just wanted to say...

TINA

No, Larson, just don't. I wasn't going to call the cops. Don't make me.

*LARSON heads for the door.*

LARSON

Okay, I'm going. I'm going, Tina. (*pauses, waiting for TINA to call him back which she doesn't.*) Okay, I'm gone.

*LARSON exits. TINA sits down at the kitchen table, shocked and exasperated.*

TINA

That did not happen. That did not happen. Tina, do you hear me? Did not happen.

*TINA's cell phone rings. TINA answers.*

TINA

John? You're on your way home, aren't you? I don't want to be alone right now. (*pause*) No, nothing's happened. I just want you here, sweetheart. I'm fixing your favorite dinner. And I just thought. (*pause*) Yeah, I know what you'd like. Some nice wine. Heitz Martha's Vineyard... Let's make it a romantic evening. Just the two of us.

*TINA paces nervously. In the following dialogue, we hear JOHN from the other side of stage which is dark.*

TINA

Not *tonight*, you've been working late every night this week. What is going on down there? I thought you said a few weeks ago that the clients were drying up and you didn't even know about your job anymore...

JOHN

You cross-examining me? I don't like to be cross-examined.

TINA

No, I am not cross-examining you! Don't even say that to me. I trust you, baby. I just need you tonight. Especially tonight. I've had a day.

JOHN

Something happen?

TINA

No, nothing *happened*. (*pause*) Well, maybe I heard from my ol' ex, Larson. I wasn't going to tell you, but... It was a phone call, (*pause*) Yeah, he called. Larson called, John.

JOHN

*(confused)*

You've had a day? So what did the old squirrelly guy want?

TINA

What did he want? You remember Larson. He called. That's all. It was a bit spooky. John, please...

JOHN

That's nice, dear. I'm glad you've had a nice day. Well, I got work tonight. Be done about ten, I suppose.

TINA

10 o'clock? *Johnny*? What will you do for dinner? *(pause)* Well, maybe I *am* a bit frightened. Larson might decide to come over and, you know, to *visit*. He's got major screws loose. The old engine that was his head totally done froze up.

JOHN

Gotta go, sweetheart.

TINA

If you gotta go, you gotta go. I'm surely not stopping anyone from *going*. *(pause)* Oh, but wait. Larson says maybe we could get back together. He meant, *him and I*. You and I are together now, right dear? Of course we are and you don't like no man talking like that to me. Don't you think you should be here in case he decides to drop by and try something *weird*?

JOHN

Just deal with it. This sounds like one of your dramatic things. I got work.

TINA

Yeah, I know it is going to be okay. I just thought if you were here and I fixed you that nice dinner. You like lamb and that special plum sauce. Can't you just taste it? Let me hear you smack your lips...

JOHN

Is this life or some freaking melodramatic theatre? You got an *audience* there with you for (*sneering support*, don't you? Well, don't you?

TINA

Yes, but that was insulting. And yeah, your work is important. For our future. It doesn't have to be an either/or, you know. Life *or* drama, I mean. I am fine. I'll be waiting up for you at ten. I'll get into *that* nightie, Johnny. You remember that nightie. Don't you, John boy? (*pause*) Too tired for *it*, huh? Now I know I don't know what is going on. *Johnny is too tired for his fun time?* He doesn't want his lamb and now...

*JOHN hangs up the phone.*

TINA

Well, I never!

*The phone rings. TINA at first is not going to answer. After several rings, she does. Lights come up on other side of stage with JOHN sitting at a table in a kitchen very similar to TINA's.*

TINA

You hung up on me! I am coming down to that office this very minute...

JOHN

Don't do it. Sorry, baby. I didn't mean anything. It was an accident. I would never hang up on you, sweetheart. Forgive?

*(firmly)*

But I do have to get back to work. And now. I'll be there no later than 11 or 12. You don't need to stay up. Love you, sweetheart.

*Lights go out on TINA's kitchen. Action freezes on JOHN's set.*

DIRECTOR (OFFSTAGE)

Okay. Okay, Ms. Williams... Now you got something started. It's a kitchen play, huh? Conflict. Let's see it. Don't forget whose journey we are on here? And remember, we haven't got much time. You got ten minutes. Tops.

*Action resumes on JOHN's set. DEBBIE enters.*

DEBBIE

The new missus?

JOHN

Yeah, she's got the hots and blues over something. Her ex-boyfriend shows up at her place and she gets all freaked out.

DEBBIE

Well, I would think that would be a development a creative person like a playwright could do something with, if you know what I mean.

JOHN

You would.

DEBBIE

And what does that mean? You think I'm only a two-bit—

JOHN

No, Deb. I'm saying you know how to make a good thing out of anything, sweetheart.

DEBBIE

You bet your sweet life I can. Take this. I make the best out of this, don't I?

JOHN

Of course, dear. It isn't the most natural of situations, is it? I mean, you and I are caught up in someone's mental playtime and we have to make it like it is—

DIRECTOR (OFFSTAGE)

*(aside, but loud enough audience overhears)*

What the fuck?

DEBBIE

Well, it isn't quite like a marriage I've noticed. Or a halfway decent affair or even anything like that, for that matter. You went and got yourself all hitched up to Tina, and me, I'm still being haunted by my old—

JOHN

Don't say it. It doesn't have to be if you just don't say it. Not tonight at least.

DEBBIE

We have to face it. We have to face up to it. The man

is an absolute wolf.

JOHN

Just not tonight. Not tonight. Okay? (pause) I brought Heitz Martha's Vineyard...

DEBBIE

(*stopping, hugs him*)

You always do. Oh, Johnny! (pause) And maybe that is why I love you.

JOHN

The secret word! You said the secret word. Usually we don't say it at least until after the first drink. (*wolf-like*) I have a feeling tonight is going to be a very special night.

*Lights out. Lights up on side of stage with TINA sitting at her kitchen table. TINA has a legal pad. She is furiously marking off whole pages of previous scribbling and intensely writing new. There is a knock on the back door. She goes to the door. LARSON enters.*

LARSON

The coast clear?

TINA

Yeah. Come in. I've made lamb with plum sauce. Your favorite. And I've got Heitz Martha's Vineyard.

LARSON

Tina, I'm sorry about all that drama. I mean earlier. I just didn't know if you were expecting me to come back. At all. Or ever.

TINA

It's fine, Larson. You are absolutely insane. I know that now. It is okay. It's kinda cute.

LARSON

But what about John? What do we do with John?

TINA

John who? There is no John anymore.

LARSON

At work John. A year ago or so you came home and said you were quitting me for him. You'd been together. A motel or something.

TINA

That was *last year*. Not tonight. Tonight is different. He has Debbie.

LARSON

Debbie? You never said anything about Debbie.

TINA

Yeah. John's girlfriend, Debbie. They have that L-word thing going. I think it's a clever touch to the narrative, don't you think?

LARSON

(*furious*)

Debbie! You never said anything about Debbie! Why does Debbie have to be in this?

TINA

Jeez. Calm down, Larson. I admitted everything with John to you the minute it happened. It never

occurred to me that you would care about details. If I must say so, it is perverted of you to go off about his relationship with his girlfriend. What were you after here, a little *two on two*?

LARSON

Debbie! My God. Debbie!

DIRECTOR (OFFSTAGE)

One minute! Let's put a wrap on this.

TINA

*(speeding up her speech noticeably)*

Oh, I get it! You never cared about losing me. All you cared about was getting a little something for yourself? You wanted a little Debbie. Some Debbie cakes with your wine. Or maybe a whole lot of Debbie, huh? You wanna gorge yourself on Debbie cakes. Maybe even some nice chocolate iced, honey buns, huh Larson? Man, you are one sicko—

LARSON

I just want what I am entitled to. You know. (pause) What's coming to me.

TINA

*Entitled to?* I go off with John and *you* think you are entitled to something? What a warped little brain you have!

LARSON

Tina, Debbie is my—

TINA

Your *what*?

LARSON

Did you know that? Did you even have a clue? This whole thing is totally out of hand. This is probably the silliest play you've ever written. *Whatever*. I don't even get it anymore. Who is with whom anyway? I'm going to be embarrassed to shake hands with the audience after this one is over.

TINA

You poor thing. I didn't know. I didn't know at all. You must feel terrible. And what you must think of me! You must just hate me!

LARSON

*(cuddles up to her)*

Oh, baby, it's fine. It's not you. It's not about you anyway. It's fine.

TINA

Yeah I know, it's about love. It's always about *love*, isn't it, *Larson*? It's never about who's afraid of Thomas and Virginia's wolf.

LARSON

I am, Tina. I am.

*Lights out.*

END OF PLAY.

# **STEVEN OSTROWSKI**

## **the purpose of a crow**

**CHARACTERS:** A beautiful WOMAN in her late twenties, wearing a dark, knee-length dress. A handsome male INTERVIEWER in his late twenties, casually dressed. An older male ARTIST in his 40s or older, eccentrically dressed with disheveled hair.

**SETTING:** A hotel suite in a city with a sofa and a chair. Present day.

***OPENING:** Knock at door. WOMAN greets INTERVIEWER, who reveals by his glance that he is impressed with her beauty. WOMAN seats INTERVIEWER at the sofa, though she remains standing.*

WOMAN  
(softly, vaguely)

He'll be back shortly. He went out. He went for a walk, I think.

INTERVIEWER

No problem. The magazine has been requesting an interview with him for months, for a series I'm writing on contemporary American artists. Perhaps you've seen some of the articles?

WOMAN

I'm sorry. No.

INTERVIEWER

*( fleeting look of disappointment )*

In any case, we called him and wrote to him, many, many times. No response. Then all of a sudden, yesterday, one of his people calls and says, today, eleven AM. I guess he operates that way, huh? On a whim. When it suits him.

WOMAN

There's no telling why he says yes or why he says no. Or when, or to whom.

INTERVIEWER

Frankly, if I were in his shoes, I'd make it a point to be more available for interviews. Not for the sake of publicity or anything like that, mind you, but because I'd want people to know the purpose of my work. Some of his stuff is just so... obscure. Even incomprehensible.

WOMAN

Some. But some of it...

*She shrugs, doesn't finish her sentence.*

INTERVIEWER

Are you an employee of his?

WOMAN

*(demurely)*

No.

INTERVIEWER

I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry. (*Beat.*) My guess is the only reason he agreed to see me is because the editor at my magazine is a friend of his.

WOMAN

Did you say your editor is a *friend* of his?

INTERVIEWER

Yes. Well, friend, acquaintance. Whatever. Why do you say it that way?

WOMAN

It's just that he doesn't have a lot of friends, I think. But many, many acquaintances.

INTERVIEWER

And why do you think that is? No friends?

WOMAN

I didn't say no friends. (*Beat.*) He's, you know, an inward man.

INTERVIEWER

That's not all, though. Most artists don't want to have to deal with me at all.

WOMAN

Deal with *you*? Why do you say that?

*INTERVIEWER pauses, continues reluctantly.*

INTERVIEWER

I've developed a bit of a reputation. I tell the truth, as

I see it. That's the purpose of my work as a writer, as a responsible art critic. I believe the value of art is its ability to convey a coherent vision of life. Order out of chaos. Yes, the vision may be dismal, but it has to be coherent. Deliberate obscurity, in my opinion, is merely artistic laziness. A cardinal sin.

WOMAN

And you believe he's guilty of this sin?

INTERVIEWER

To be honest, yes. I'm not a fan of his. I think he's enigmatic and obscure precisely because he doesn't have much of worth to say. I don't think of him as a true artist. I think he's pulled the wool over people's eyes for years. You disagree?

WOMAN

*(Looks away. Small, sad smile.)*

It's not for me to speak for him.

*She begins to turn away, turns back.*

WOMAN

Is your intention to write some kind of exposé of him? Because I think he may be beyond that. So much has already been said about him. He seems rather oblivious. Or impervious.

INTERVIEWER

This won't be an exposé. (*Beat.*) Just a search for the truth.

*INTERVIEWER looks at WOMAN, who considers. INTERVIEWER sits again.*

WOMAN

I get tongue-tied when I try to talk about art. I *love* it, I *feel* it deeply. But I can't seem to discuss it articulately.

*She gazes off.*

WOMAN

When I was younger, I was determined to become an artist. In the beginning, I was a dancer. Not very good, I'm afraid. I tired too easily. Then I tried writing poetry seriously. I read a lot. I wrote. Still, it wasn't very good poetry. But... necessary. For me, I mean. I mean, I was after something in those poems. Something that eluded me everywhere else. It was like trying to write one's way into knowing God—something like that. I sent my poems out and they came back with little typed notes saying thanks but no thanks. I couldn't stand all that rejection, so I stopped writing. I've faced it: I'm not an artist. But I love art. Though, as I said, I can't articulate very well what it is that speaks to me.

INTERVIEWER

You're not alone in that. But it's my life's work to discuss art as clearly as I can. And as honestly.

WOMAN

You're right, I don't agree with you. Personally, I've always admired his work. I always thought he was so... *brave*. In his work he speaks his own language.

*She looks into the INTERVIEWER's eyes.*

INTERVIEWER

Yes, but the problem is, nobody else speaks it. It's the

language of the Tower of Babel. He's not concerned with truth. Sure, he's "creative"—if you want to call it that, and strange. But so what? What's he contributing? What's his purpose?

WOMAN

I can't speak for him.

INTERVIEWER

May I ask, are you... his lover?

*Beat.*

WOMAN

I don't think I want to answer that question.

INTERVIEWER

Sorry. I'm prying again. It's just that you're so... so beautiful. My God, did I just say that?

WOMAN

You're kind. (*Beat.*) I don't know what I am to him. It's nothing we've ever tried to define.

*She pauses, then sits down beside INTERVIEWER.*

INTERVIEWER

Knowing him, he wouldn't want a definition, would he? But you do have some kind of relationship with him, obviously.

WOMAN

I'm sorry. I don't think this conversation is quite appropriate.

INTERVIEWER

You're right. (*Beat.*) About my saying that you're beautiful... (*Beat.*) I'm sorry. That slipped out.

WOMAN

*(bashfully)*

It's... flattering to be told.

INTERVIEWER

He must tell you. If you were my lover I don't think I'd ever stop saying it. My God, listen to me. I'm sorry. Again.

WOMAN

He never uses the word lover. Not... to me.

*She looks down, then deeply into the INTERVIEWER's eyes.*

WOMAN

I wish sometimes that... oh, never mind.

*Sounds near door.*

WOMAN

He's here. He's coming in.

INTERVIEWER

Look, I don't know how committed you are to him, if you are at all, and I don't mean to be presumptuous or outrageous, but I'd love to call you. I'm not famous. Not yet. But I have a lot to offer. You'd certainly know where you stand with me. It could be very sweet.

WOMAN

You want to call me?

*She considers. Finds a scrap of paper and writes a number down and hands it to INTERVIEWER.*

WOMAN

I'll be honest. I may or may not answer. It would depend.

INTERVIEWER

On?

*ARTIST comes in through the door, looking somewhat disheveled. WOMAN stands. ARTIST kisses WOMAN on cheek, then looks at INTERVIEWER for a few long seconds. ARTIST nods hello and takes seat in lounge chair. WOMAN sits back down next to INTERVIEWER.*

ARTIST

Jack Frist asked me if I'd talk with you. Jack's a good man.

INTERVIEWER

*(suddenly nervous)*

Yes, he is. I love working for him. (Beat.) Okay, then. I guess I'll start, if that's okay.

ARTIST

It's okay with me.

INTERVIEWER

Good. After all, I'm sure you're a busy man. Okay then, can you tell me what you believe to be the purpose of your work?

ARTIST

*(smiles, shakes his head)*

Well. Good one. I thought you'd want to know what I like to eat for breakfast, or what kind of socks I prefer. Being a younger man and all. Okay, well, tell me what you mean by purpose.

INTERVIEWER

One's purpose is the reason one does what one does.

ARTIST

Oh, okay. Yeah, fine, except sometimes I get up and walk to the window, even though I'm not aware I've done it. I just find myself there. Sometimes I find myself there hours after I got there. Or I find myself driving down a road I don't remember getting on. Not sure why. Maybe my purpose is that I'm hoping I'll see something interesting. Maybe I just have a thing for windows and roads.

INTERVIEWER

But as to my question...

ARTIST

Or, why did I dream I was floating through a field of lemon trees last night? And why was a dark-haired woman trying to warn me not to cross the muddy stream—I believe it was called the Stream of Reasons—without a sword?

INTERVIEWER

I can't interpret your dreams for you.

ARTIST

No, you can't. So, does that answer your question?

INTERVIEWER

But it's not an answer. I'm asking about *purpose*. The purpose of your work.

ARTIST

Well, let me ask you something. What's the purpose of a crow?

INTERVIEWER

*What?* I don't get it. (*Beat.*) Crows simply evolved from less complex life forms. They function as part of a huge, complex ecosystem. I suppose that ultimately their purpose is to survive.

ARTIST

Okay, so how about we let that be the answer to your question?

INTERVIEWER

It's not an answer to my question.

ARTIST

Best I can do. Look, I'm going to have to go soon. I'm meeting someone somewhere. Is there anything else you want to ask?

*INTERVIEWER sighs, looks at WOMAN, who looks from him to ARTIST.*

INTERVIEWER

Please try to be as straightforward as possible with this one, if you would? It's a critical question, one that I've asked every artist in the series: In your view, does the artist owe it to his audience to transmit a clear and coherent vision?

ARTIST

That is a critical question, isn't it? (*Beat.*) Whew! Okay. You see this woman here?

INTERVIEWER

Of course I do. And I have to say, she's absolutely stunning. More beautiful than any work of art.

*WOMAN's eyes drop demurely.*

ARTIST

Okay. Sure, but are we both seeing this woman in the same way? Do we both have the same thoughts about the way she breathes like the sea? Do we both interpret that moonless-night look in her eyes with any kind of common language? Do we both assume the same things about the repercussions of her mother's lifelong bouts of sadness? Later tonight, will we both be thinking about something she uttered to us today as she turned away from us with the same kind of hurt and pleasure? Do you hear the same song in her silence that I hear?

INTERVIEWER

*(perplexed and frustrated)*

Well... obviously not.

## ARTIST

That's my answer to your critical question. I'm sorry if it isn't what you need.

INTERVIEWER  
(angrily)

I don't need anything. And I don't think you're sorry at all. I think you think this is all some big joke. You treat me the way you treat your audience. With disdain. With deliberate obscurity.

*He turns to WOMAN.*

## INTERVIEWER

And I don't doubt he treats you that way as well. I don't know how you can take it. Or why you'd want to. This man would drive me mad. (Beat.) You can come with me, you know. I'd love it if you would come with me. I think you'd be so much happier.

*WOMAN stares at INTERVIEWER, then at ARTIST, who seems indifferent. WOMAN stands, starts to speak but doesn't.*

ARTIST  
(to WOMAN)

You're free to go. He's offering happiness. I can't offer that. (Beat.) And you have more freedom than most. I wish I had your kind of freedom.

*(nods toward INTERVIEWER)*

Hell, for that matter I wish I had his.

*ARTIST smiles. INTERVIEWER looks dumbfounded.*

WOMAN  
(softly, sadly)

I believe you.

(looks away)

I believe you.

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FABIO SASSI ~245~



# **IVAN DE MONBRISON**



**Are You Mad at Me**



Chat with Death



Don't Go Away



I Am Killing You



Look at You!

IVAN DE MONBRISON ~251~



Men Fighting



Self Portrait

IVAN DE MONBRISON ~253~



Struggle



Under the Shade of the Mind

IVAN DE MONBRISON ~255~

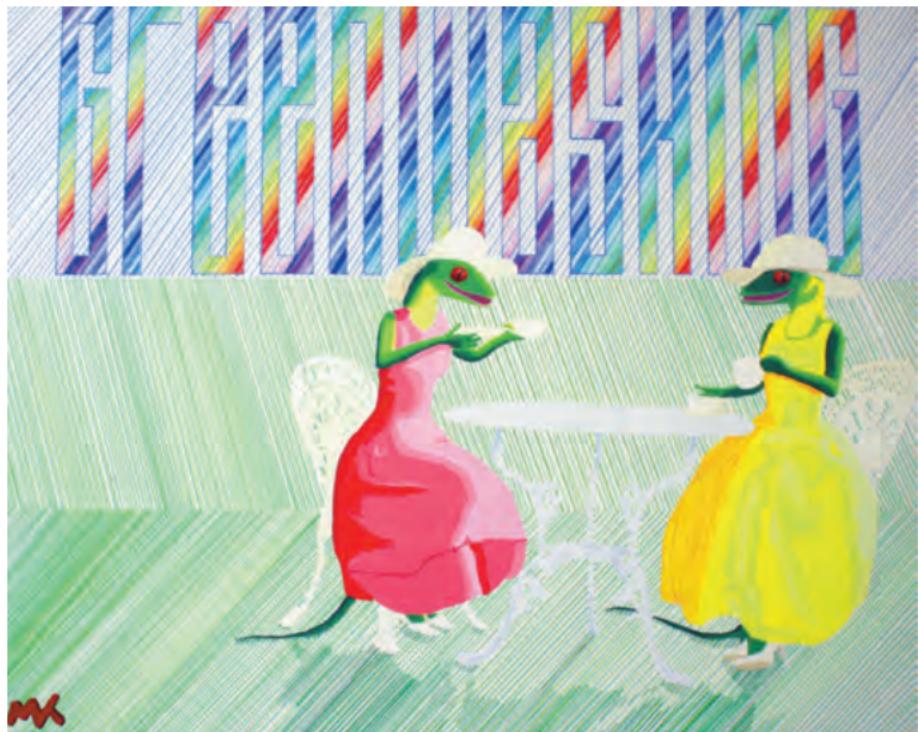


What a Beautiful Show

# **MOHAMED KAHOUADJI**



Galvanize



I Shine Like a Princess



Purple Rain

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**David S. Atkinson** is the author of *Bones Buried in the Dirt* (River Otter Press 2013). His writing appears in *Bartleby Snopes*, *gray Sparrow Journal*, *Interrobang?! Magazine*, *Atticus Review*, and others. His writing website is <http://davidsatkinsonwriting.com/> and he spends his non-literary time working as a patent attorney in Denver.

**LaShonda Katrice Barnett** is the author of the story collection *Callaloo* and editor of *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters On Their Craft* and the forthcoming *Off The Record: Conversations with African American & Brazilian Women Musicians* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). She is a past fellow of the Sewanee Writers Conference and Provincetown Fine Arts Center. Find her on the web at [lashondabarnett.com](http://lashondabarnett.com) and <https://twitter.com/lashondakatrice>.

**Cory Bradley** is a self-published novelist and short story writer living on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. Publication credits include short stories published in the print journals *The Salal Review* and *The Rock Creek Review*, and a flash fiction vignette recently accepted for publication by the literary magazine *C4*. Much of his fiction draws from experiences collected during travels to the United Kingdom, Ireland and Japan. When he is not busy with a writing project he is either playing music, reading no fewer than three books at a time or losing gracelessly to his wife Jina at whatever game they happen to be addicted to.

**Maria Brandt** received her PhD in English from Boston College in 2003 and is Assistant Professor of English at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, where she teaches American Literature Since 1865, Women in Literature, Dramatic Literature, and Creative Writing. At MCC, Maria also runs a fledgling Creative Writing program, directs the award-winning interdisciplinary drama initiative The Sixth Act, and has won both the NISOD Excellence in Teaching Award and the Hanson Excellence in Teaching Award. She published “The Man in the Family’: Staging Gender in Waiting for Lefty and American Social Protest Theatre” in *Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature* (Routledge 2011) and “For His Own Satisfaction’: Eliminating the New Woman Figure in McTeague” in *American Transcendental Quarterly* (2004). Her short play “Santa’s Baby” was produced by The Bridge Theatre Company in Boston and placed as a finalist for the Genesee Reading Series; “The Root People” has placed in several nationwide competitions, was produced during the Boog City Poetry Festival in Greenwich Village, and was published in *Shark Reef Literary Magazine*’s Summer 2012 issue; “The Next Thing” was co-produced as a reading by Geva Theatre Center and Writers and Books in Rochester, NY; and “Relativity” placed as a semi-finalist for the Subversive Shorts Festival in Buffalo, NY. Maria is currently working on a novel and a short-play cycle focusing on different regions across New York State.

**Clark E. Clark** lives in Laramie, Wyoming, where he is completing a book of portraits in praise of infamous men. His essays have appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *CutBank*, *Fourth Genre*, *Wag's Revue* and others.

**Thomas Cowell** from Washington State has had three short stories recently published with *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Storychord*, and *Gravel*, respectively, and another forthcoming in *The Milo Review*.

**Libby Cudmore**'s stories and essays have appeared in *Big Lucks*, *The Vestal Review*, *Pank*, *The Citron Review*, *Kneejerk*, *Connotation Press*, *Postcard Press*, *Umbrella Factory*, *Independent Ink*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Yalobusha Review*, *The Chaffey Review*, and *The Southern Women's Review*, as well as *The Writer*, *Mixitini Matrix* and *ARCANE II* (with Matthew Quinn Martin). She is currently spending a year living by vintage beauty and dating guides at [www.geekgirlgoesglam.com](http://www.geekgirlgoesglam.com).

**Paul Dickey**'s second full-length book of poetry *Wires Over the Homeplace* is being published this summer by Pinyon Publishing. His poetry has appeared recently in *32 Poems*, *Pleiades*, *Prairie Schooner*, *the Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *the Bellevue Literary Review*, among other online and print publications. His first full-length book of poetry *They Say This is How Death Came Into the World* was published by Mayapple Press in January, 2011. Biographical information and additional notes on previous publishing activity can be found at [http://www.pw.org/content/paul\\_dickey](http://www.pw.org/content/paul_dickey).

**Colin Dodds** grew up in Massachusetts and completed his education in New York City. He's the author of several novels, including *The Last Bad Job*, which the late Norman Mailer touted as showing "something that very few writers have; a species of inner talent that owes very little to other people." Dodds' screenplay, *Refreshment—A Tragedy*, was named a semi-finalist in 2010 American Zoetrope

Contest. His poetry has appeared in more than ninety publications, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife Samantha.

**Robert Earle**'s short stories and novellas have appeared in more than fifty literary journals across the U.S. and Canada. He also is the author of two novels, *The Way Home* and *The Man Clothed in Linen*, and two books of nonfiction, *Nights in the Pink Motel* and *Identities in North America*. For twenty years he was a diplomat; now he is settled in Virginia.

Several years ago, **Debra M. Fox** started writing poems, and was delighted when some were accepted for publication in various haiku journals. While continuing to write poems, she also enjoys writing short stories and essays. Her works have been accepted in *Hyperlexia Journal*, *Blue Lyra Review*, *Squalorly*, *The Meadow*, *Burrows Press Review*, and *Embodied Effigies*. She is the Director of an adoption agency, and a lawyer. In her spare time, she loves to dance.

**Mohamed Kahouadji** is a French painter.

**Bob Meszaros** taught English at Hamden High School in Hamden, Connecticut, for thirty-two years. He retired from high school teaching in June of 1999. During the 70s and 80s his poems appeared in a number of literary journals, such as *En Passant* and *Voices International*. In the year 2000 he began teaching part time at Quinnipiac University, and he began once again to submit his work for publication. His poems have subsequently appeared in *The Connecticut Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Concho River Review*, *Northwind*, *Innisfree*, and other literary journals.

**J.R. Miller** was born and raised in the blue-collar suburbs of Detroit. After several years of working in advertising and joined by his wife and children, he moved to Florida. He received his MFA from the University of South Florida. His work has been published by *Midwestern Gothic*, *Palooka*, *Prime Number*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Stymie*, *Alligator Juniper*, *Fiction Fix* and in the anthology, *Tigertail: A South Florida Annual*. He is the Co-Founding editor of ém: A Review of Text and Image and Graphic Nonfiction editor for Sweet: a Literary Confection. You can visit his website at [www.miller580.com](http://www.miller580.com).

**Ivan de Monbrison** was born in Paris in 1969 from a french protestant father and an egyptian muslim mother, both mixed with jewish origins. His interest in art can be linked to a very liberal artistic education, where african and oceania arts were in the center of his interests. This left him with a desire to pursue the question of what art meant in the old days, and how can this be dealt with in our modern and absurd world of thriving technology. Is art religious? Thus In which way can it still be in a non-sacralized world? Chasing the human figure in a distorted way, like Bacon and Giacometti did in the past, has appeared for him the best way for this non-religious "spiritual" quest. It has appeared to get even more important as art has tended to become nowadays more and more similar to publicity, and fashion. Ivan's works have been shown in the recent years in various countries.

**Ron Morita** received a Masters in biomedical engineering from Case Western Reserve and is an electrical engineer. His short short story "The Writer" appeared in the Summer 2013 issue of Cigale Literary Magazine. His flash story "The Winner" appeared in

Issue 10 of Penduline Literary Magazine. He has four unpublished novels. *Celina's Gift* is an exposé on fire alarm reliability. In *Mother*, robots are poised to take over his world. *The Hoist* looks at the manic robotics industry. *The Bag Lady and the Face* describes the flight of two lovers from an all-powerful Church. Ron's Facebook page is <http://www.facebook.com/RonMoritaStories>.

**Steven Ostrowski** is a poet, fiction writer, playwright, and songwriter. His work has appeared widely in print and in online literary journals and magazines. Recent work appears in *WIPs Works (of Fiction) in Progress*, *Literary Orphans*, *Prism Review*, *Coe Review*, *Citron Review* and others. His music videos can be viewed on YouTube. He teaches at Central Connecticut State University.

**John Palen's** *Open Communion: New and Selected Poems* was published by Mayapple Press in 2005. Since then he has had chapbooks published by March Street Press and Pudding House, and poetry, fiction and memoir appearing or forthcoming in *Sleet*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Gulf Stream*, *Citron Review*, *Lingerpost*, *Upstreet*, *Elder Mountain*, and other publications. He lives in Central Illinois.

**Tanya Perkins** lives in a small Midwest town with spouse, daughter and various animals. She teaches writing at Indiana University East. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Sliver of Stone*, *Emrys*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Arcadia* and other venues. She has no tattoos currently but that could change.

**Frederick Pollack** is the author of two book-length narrative poems, *The Adventure and Happiness*,

both published by *Story Line Press*. Other poems in print and online journals. Adjunct professor creative writing George Washington University.

**Fabio Sassi** started making visual artworks after varied experiences in music and writing. He makes acrylics with the stencil technique on board, canvas, or other media. He uses logos, tiny objects and what is hidden, discarded or considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Nevertheless, he still prefers to shoot with an analog camera. Fabio lives and works in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at [FabioSassi.FolioHD.com](http://FabioSassi.FolioHD.com)

**Jeremy Schnee** received his MFA from Colorado State University. His short stories have appeared in *The Cottonwood Review* and *303 Magazine*. He works in a flour mill, and he's almost finished writing his first novel. For more about Jeremy's fiction, visit [www.jeremyschnee.com](http://www.jeremyschnee.com).

**Robert Joe Stout**'s articles, poetry and stories have appeared in many publications including *The American Scholar*, *America*, *South Dakota Review*, *Illya's Honey* and *Notre Dame Magazine*. He is the author of *The Blood of the Serpent: Mexican Lives*, *Why Immigrants Come to America* and *Running Out the Hurt*.

**Anne-Marie Thweatt** is a writer and writing teacher living on the desert border of Mexico in Yuma, AZ. She has studied under several great writers including Barbara Ungar, Daniel Nestor, and Rick Moody. Her work has recently been published in *Flare: The Flagler Review*, and is forthcoming this fall in *Sleet Magazine*.

**Graham Tugwell** is an Irish writer and performer and recipient of the College Green Literary Prize 2010. Over eighty of his short stories have been published, appearing in *Anobium*, *The Missing Slate*, *The Quotable*, *Pyrta*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *L'Allure Des Mots* and *Poddle*. He has lived his whole life in the village where his stories take place. He loves it with a very special kind of hate. His website is [grahamtugwell.com](http://grahamtugwell.com).

**Bill Wolak** has just published his ninth book of poetry entitled *The Art of Invisibility with the Feral Press*. Recently, he was a featured poet at The Hyderabad Literary Festival. Mr. Wolak teaches Creative Writing at William Paterson University in New Jersey.

## **ABOUT THE PUBLISHER**

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